



Incarcerated Religion: Teaching behind Walls

Spotlight on Teaching

Frederick Glennon, Editor

The AAR Committee on Teaching and Learning (Lerone Martin, Chair) sponsors Spotlight on Teaching. It appears twice each year in Religious Studies News and focuses on teaching and learning around a particular theme, concern, or setting.

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Image: A student raises his hand in a English seminar facilitated by Cornell University at the Auburn Correctional Facility. Credit: Cornell Prison Education Program.

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Incarcerated Religion: Teaching behind Walls – Editor’s Introduction

Fred Glennon, Le Moyne College

Interest in understanding and working with and for the marginalized is a growing concern within the academy. The president-elect of the American Academy of Religion, Eddie Glaude, has declared that his focus during his presidential year will be on vulnerable populations. A yearly review of the AAR Annual Meeting program will find panels drawing from research with and teaching of various vulnerable populations. As all of the authors in this issue will attest, there is no group more vulnerable than those incarcerated in the various levels of our prison system: city, county, state, and federal.

On a personal note, some of my very first teaching experiences were as an adjunct in Mercer University’s prison program where I taught ethics and religion at a county jail, a state prison, a federal prison camp, and a federal penitentiary in the Atlanta area. No one could have prepared me for the experience and the challenges I would face, certainly not the traditional classrooms where I was educated. The settings were intimidating, especially once the bars behind me clanged shut. The classrooms were across the prison yard and isolated; they had limited resources. The educational backgrounds of the students were mixed. A few students had completed high school or some college and were seeking to continue their educations; most lacked good academic preparation. Some were from other countries, and they got caught up in illegal activities while seeking to find a better path for themselves and their families; English was their second language. Yet in spite of these shortcomings they were some of the most fascinating students I have ever taught. They brought significant life experience, insight, and diversity to the ethical and religious topics we explored. At first, I was what Robert Scott refers to as the professor who has intense experiences while teaching in prison (Scott 2012).

However, the traditional pedagogy with which I was familiar, lecture with some discussion, did not seem adequate for this setting, especially given the kinds of injustices experienced by many of my students prior to and after incarceration. For example, quite a number of my students in the federal penitentiary were there because they were victims of mandatory drug-sentencing laws: nineteen-year-olds who were convicted of “conspiracy” to sell drugs serving a minimum of sixteen years in prison, many of whom just happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time. Meanwhile, across the way at the federal prison camp, white collar criminals convicted of income tax evasion or fraud, the effects of which had far greater repercussions for their victims, were living in dormitory style housing with organized softball leagues, serving sentences lasting one to two years. The disparities in the system and the power dynamics that created them were evident and these disparities became subject matter for the ethical and religious issues we addressed in class. In response, I began to explore more liberatory pedagogies which enabled us to bring these issues into clearer focus for understanding and discussion. These pedagogies continue to influence how and what I teach even in the traditional college setting. I relate

these experiences because they were formative for me, something the authors in this issue of *Spotlight* also discuss in various ways.

The authors note the various challenges they face when teaching in prison. Liz Bounds relates her experiences of teaching in a Georgia women's prison and the implications for her role as teacher. Where in most classrooms she is in the position of authority, in this setting the prison is the authority—restricting materials she can use and shortening class time unexpectedly because the inmate count is off. Yet this middle position is also a source of insight into the lives of her students and the complexity of prison life. Similarly, Andrew Skotnicki's experience of teaching at Rikers Island illustrates how prison authorities can delay students from attending the class. More significantly, many of the students are detainees, which means that they might not be able to finish the class because their cases get adjudicated and they are released or sent on to a state penitentiary. The emotional, spiritual, and psychological toll this takes on the students adds to the challenge of educating them. James Wetzel wonders about the task of trusting the students he is about to teach, especially when the authorities and society at large suggest that the inmates are not worthy of that trust. Yet he is humbled by how he has become the recipient of the trust the inmates place in him as their teacher.

In spite of the challenges, the authors of these essays all note how rewarding the experience of teaching with and learning from this population is. Joshua Dubler speaks of the thrill he experiences teaching incarcerated students at a New York correctional facility because of the life experiences and perspectives they bring to the texts they study. They have not bought into the academic standards and mores of his on-campus students, and they are quick to point out when a text strikes them as preposterous or incomprehensible. Bounds notes the surprise and delight that many of the teachers find when they witness the intensity of desire to learn that the prisoners bring to the class. Melanie Webb discusses the joy and insight that many of the ministry students who are not incarcerated at Garden State Correctional Facility, but who participate in Princeton Theological Seminary's CTM-Inside Program, experience when they encounter the diversity of thought and personality represented among the incarcerated students. Skotnicki highlights the bonds of care and commitment forged between the privileged students from the main campus and the prisoners.

Finally, each of these essays in their own way seeks to raise consciousness about the structural and systemic problems of mass incarceration and the need to break down the walls that divide us. Wetzel notes that the problem of "mass incarceration" transcends the issue of crowded prisons and highlights the problems in our criminal justice system in particular and in American political culture more generally. Skotnicki incorporates the hermeneutical privilege of the poor as his class addresses the questions of the who, what, and why of our system of punishment. Dubler seeks to challenge the barriers we have erected between the incarcerated and the free in hopes of ending the dehumanization that makes incarcerated people invisible. Webb notes that in a society where mass incarceration is widespread, the imperative to come together to understand one another is crucial. Structuring the classroom and the pedagogy around mutuality and a common concern for ministry enables them to break down the walls that divide those imprisoned and those who are free. As a result, as one of the teachers in the Georgia women's prison suggests, "education is freed from confinements of privilege and domination and unleashed."

Resources

Scott, Robert. 2013. "Distinguishing Radical Teaching from Merely Having Intense Experiences While Teaching in Prison," *Radical Teacher* 95 (Spring): 22–32.

Opening My Eyes: Teaching in a Women's Prison

Elizabeth M. Bounds, Emory University

If I keep my eyes shut, there is nothing unusual about this class except perhaps that all the student voices are female.

The teacher asks, "How do you think David is portrayed here?" There is silence, a ruffling of pages, as texts are consulted. The question is asked again.

"In some different ways," one woman says tentatively.

More voices come in and soon there is full exploration of the text and discussion of the character of King David.

But if I open my eyes, everything changes. I am in a room with several formica-topped tables, each with a group of women. The windows look out on a parallel set of windowed classrooms. The walls are concrete, institutional, and nondescript. There are no computers to be seen and the blackboards lack chalk. The women are black and white, of various ages. Some have old-fashioned black-rimmed glasses and some have heavy black shoes. Some have blunt-cut hair while others have perms and eyeshadow. But all are dressed alike, in loose-fitting, buttoned khaki chino shirts and pants. Each shirt has on the back "DOC" in large black letters, and many of the shirts have small black numbers or last names on their breast pockets.

We are in a women's prison in Georgia, in a class required for a one-year certificate in theological studies sponsored by the Atlanta Theological Association, a consortium of seminaries.¹ The women have all applied for admission, stating their desire to study theology. They all have at least a GED and have to be free of disciplinary reports (DRs²) for the last six months. The teachers are a mix of master's students from ATA schools and doctoral students from Emory. While I taught classes before I cofounded this program, now I am the administrator, working with our codirectors to select teachers and to supervise the teaching, and, most importantly, ensuring the survival of our program.

¹ For information about the certificate in theological studies see <http://candler.emory.edu/programs-resources/institutes-initiatives/certificate-theological-studies.html>

² DR is shorthand for a "disciplinary report," which is a report of a rule violation written by an officer or other staff member. A Disciplinary Committee reviews the report, questions the offender and any witnesses, examines any evidence, and makes a ruling regarding the offender's action. Dismissal will erase the charge from an inmate's record, while a guilty verdict will carry a sanction, usually a set amount of time in solitary confinement ("lockdown"). An inmate's DR record can determine privileges and parole approval.

In terms of pedagogies and classroom experiences, as I suggested above, teaching in prison is like many other kinds of teaching in colleges or in seminaries. You are concerned with the different learning styles, background preparation, and experiences of your students. But the context demands very specific considerations that are not to be found in most classroom environments.

Teacher Authority Plays Out against Prison Authority

Prison authority is paramount—inescapable. It begins with the challenges of entering a prison, which vary according to state and to the security level of the prison. Even when you do have approval, you cannot simply bring in whatever materials you wish. Only certain types of pens are acceptable; wire-bound notebooks are impossible as the wire could be undone and used for a weapon; certain DVDs may be suspect. After teaching for a while, you start to think like the prison—for example, before a book is chosen, I imagine what an officer might think if she or he saw the book among an inmate's possessions. And careful as you may be, you can be caught short if a rule has been changed or if an officer checking your bag at the entry gate is under pressure or at the end of an eighteen-hour shift. You also keep in mind the ways material can be seized, bartered, flaunted, etc. You begin to see pens, folders, and notebooks in new ways: not just as tools of learning, but items of value in a starved and limited economy. Indeed they are of value to teachers too as every class or program I know runs on almost no funds.

Your classes can be shortened for a variety of reasons, especially if there is a problem requiring that the entire system is locked down so an accurate count of inmates can be determined (counts happen several times a day). Persons in your class may have to leave because of a medical appointment, or they may not arrive at your class because of some problem with the officer on their home range. You may find out classes are cancelled because of a lice outbreak or because of Christmas package distribution.

As a teacher, you stand in a middle position. Certainly you have authority in the classroom, not just because you are the teacher, but simply because you are not incarcerated. On the other hand, in some ways, your authority, like your students, is subject to the law of the prison. These middle places are, in my view, richly complex. While they can be frustrating, they enable me to have some small sense of what our women students experience. They are also some of the many places where students teach me.

Your Teaching Tools Are Often “Old Fashioned”—Pen, Paper, Students, Teacher

For a long time, the one classroom tool I could count on was the blackboard (the real one). However, no chalk or erasers in prison—carry your own! TVs and DVD players are locked away requiring planning and, sometimes, searching. But new technologies are entering the prison world, especially in credit-bearing programs, like AA or BA programs. All of the women where we work now have tablets, and we will soon be able to set up course readings that can be downloaded. But the lack of technology signals something else: the isolation in which prisoners necessarily exist. In that isolation, one dimension of the teacher's role, which has often been less visible in a culture that puts little value on education, is heightened. You are deeply aware that you are a mentor because you may be one of the few people interacting with inmates who is not employed by the Department of Corrections. You are very visible to your students and represent something of the “outside” world that can seem far away. You matter.

Your Students Deeply Value the Learning Experience, Which Is Often Entirely New To Them

One of the key features of teaching in a prison is the intensity of the desire to learn. Every new teacher in our program is surprised and delighted by this. There is no right to education, although there are efforts to provide GEDs for the large number of prisoners without high school diplomas (and even access

to this may be limited to those with only a few years to release). But the possibilities of any further education are limited. Access to Pell Grants to support college education was banned in the mid-90s. A 2011 study suggested that among the total incarcerated population, only 6% have access to formal postsecondary educational opportunities, of which perhaps 75% are vocationally oriented certificates (e.g., cosmetology, plumbing, etc.) (Gorgol and Sponsler, 2011).

There is a growing interest in educational access since studies suggest that greater education means fewer persons returning to prison—the prime argument that every prison education program has to make. And I can certainly make the argument that our students develop skills in reading, writing, and critical thinking. But what delights our teachers is not really the skill acquisition but rather the sense that what is taught and learned *matters*. While some of the women had good experiences in primary and secondary schools, most of them did not. Sometimes they simply did not pay attention, but more often, I suspect, no one was really interested in their learning or thought they had the capacity to learn. In prison they realize both that they can learn and that they like learning.

As one student put it, “While in the theology courses, I finally had something that challenged my mind, spirit, and soul. I learned more in six months ... than I thought was even possible to learn in that short amount of time. The more I learned in the theology course, the more I wanted to learn.”

Distinctions between Theological Frameworks and Religious Studies Frameworks Look Different³

Although our program is in Christian theology, we do offer courses with comparative dimensions, such as African Influence in Islam, Judaism and Islam, and Buddhist Meditation (here it helps to have access to doctoral students in religious studies at Emory!). However, distinctions like emic versus etic are simply not that relevant. Everything learned is incorporated personally and reflectively. However, our program, unlike the majority of religious-related programming in prisons, is not about evangelism or faith-oriented therapies. Our classes are places of critical reflection practiced through teacher-student and student-student engagement. While the students are predominantly Christian, and many of them from conservative backgrounds, we also have students practicing Islam, Buddhism, Wicca, Messianic Judaism, and nothing at all. Our classes are places where theo-religious exploration is encouraged, not judged or cut off. As one student put it, “The theology certificate program gives me the chance to study God on my own terms.”

While openness and exploration are fairly standard guidelines for teaching in religious studies, there is at least one key difference. Disagreement means something different when people have to live together, twenty-four-hours a day/seven-days a week, sometimes for the rest of their lives. The stakes can be very high.

Conclusion

In the midst of these constraints and possibilities, students and teachers in our program practice remarkable creativity. As prison educator Rob Scott puts it, “Displaced from the participants' natural home environment, people can discover new potentials precisely because no one is in their ‘comfort zone’” (Scott 2013). Texts and questions in theology and religious studies take on new meanings. As one teacher, a MDiv student, said, “Something remarkable happens when you take the very text you are reading in a seminary class on systematic theology and read it with a room full of women in prison. Words begin to mean different things and theoretical concepts are brought to bear in the messy,

³ Thanks to Thomas Fabisiak and Sarah Farmer, the current codirectors of the certificate program, for help with this section.

contorted, but very real lives of women today. Theological education is freed from confinements of privilege and domination and unleashed.”

Resources

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Education as Social Transformation

Andrew Skotnicki, Manhattan College

Introduction

I am a professor in the religious studies department at Manhattan College. Each semester I teach a course entitled Criminal Justice Ethics at the New York City jail complex on Rikers Island. Half of the students are from our main campus; the other half includes either men or women from one of the jails on the island. The course has a deliberately secular title, but the intent is to trace significant ethical questions raised in the apprehension, prosecution, and detention of individuals to their roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The parallel goal is to reframe the entire structure and practice of criminal justice in terms of an inclusive, compassionate, and restorative vision of human weakness, human potential, and human fulfillment.

Challenges

Teaching at the jail presents a number of challenges beside the normal and significant pedagogical concerns of creating a harmonious classroom environment, stimulating creative and critical appreciation of the texts, and encouraging, accompanying, and providing tutorial help for the incarcerated students who, for the most part, are taking their first college class.

The first of these challenges is Rikers Island itself. It has been the focus of almost constant local attention in recent years due to its appalling rates of suicide, homicide, violence, and the well-documented and life-threatening indifference of many of the officers and staff to the needs of the sick, the mentally ill, and the vulnerable members of the confined population. There have been repeated calls from community and political leaders to close the facility entirely. The effect for those of us who run programs there is the moral and communicative fault line that has grown—and become increasingly more unstable—between many of the uniformed personnel and their civilian counterparts both at the jail and in the wider community. This has served to saddle service providers with an unprecedented and often deleterious lack of attention, and even demonstrative inattention, to the processing, movement, and access to services that enable the class to function. For example, in our class in the fall of 2015 in a jail serving eighteen- to twenty-four-year-old males, a significant percentage of the students were late each week despite the fact that the officers in each housing unit were notified three hours prior to the beginning of the class. I also received an angry complaint from one of the captains describing his “perception,” and that of many of the prison personnel, was that our young women were at the jail “slumming” and showing themselves off rather than engaging in a serious and honorable educational pursuit. All of this despite the fact that the students are supervised at all times, and the young women in question were deeply committed to the mission of our program and the men with whom they worked.

The second significant challenge is the often radical instability of the men and women we serve. Jails

house two classes of persons: detainees (those awaiting trial) and those who are serving their sentences for misdemeanors or low-grade felonies. If the class consists of detainees, we stand to lose them at some point during the semester if they are either released or, more typically, found guilty and sent to an upstate penitentiary. We must also be attentive to the often severe emotional, spiritual, and psychological trauma that they undergo as they await the adjudication of their cases. It is difficult to balance the need to make inattentive or underprepared students accountable with the compassion that naturally arises upon seeing the painful and fearful look in their eyes as they await or are in the midst of a trial, the result of which could quite literally prove fatal to them.

The third challenge in teaching at the jail is at once the most pressing and, potentially, the most life-enhancing. The typical man or woman who takes the class is black or brown, poor, already with a criminal record, and has a home address that is either a shelter or in an unstable living situation in some of this nation's most violent and economically depressed neighborhoods. We attempt to rectify this daunting set of circumstances by providing each of the confined students who complete the class the opportunity to come to our school and take classes free of charge. This opportunity finds its way into the curriculum and our relationships with the students as the course must include material on, and provide a forum to discuss, the reentry process and the significant barriers that exist to the successful integration of former offenders into the mainstream of society.

Course Goals and Questions

While the obstacles are significant, the goals we seek to meet far exceed the frustrations involved in our efforts. In terms of practical theology, the course is designed to draw as much as possible upon what is termed the "hermeneutical privilege of the poor." All class sessions revolve around the conversations we foster between our typically privileged students from the main campus and the incarcerated men or women who, as poor members of racial minorities, have by and large been consciously excised from the main lines of social mobility. Each semester, the texts come alive as our jailed students share a narrative that unmask the facile justifications that overwhelmingly punish the poor for their character foibles and just as overwhelmingly casts a blind eye to the similar (or worse) character flaws of the well-to-do. These conversations also provide the basis for peer mentoring, not only as the incarcerated help their visiting classmates to see the faces behind penal demographics, but also as our outside students share the skills they have learned in reading comprehension, note taking, and paper preparation with their classmates from the jail. The conversations also form bonds of deep personal care and, hopefully, commitment. For, as mentioned, our proximate aim is to integrate the men and women from the jail into our campus life after they are released with the hope that each will obtain an undergraduate degree. Our long term goal is for all of our students to be active in reforming the criminal justice system in terms of the theological commitments to accountability, reconciliation, and restoration.

The course content is constructed around three questions: Why do we punish? Who do we punish? How do we punish? For each question, an overview is created wherein contemporary answers to the questions are presented alongside answers provided either from the history of the church or from significant theological figures. For example, in addressing the question of the justification for punishment, students read Immanuel Kant's influential argument that no circumstantial factors lessen the gravity of crime and therefore that punishment must exact a toll from the offender that is commensurate with the harm caused. Jeremy Bentham's writings are discussed to highlight the logic of deterrence—that punishment should act as a warning both to the offender and to society that there are stern consequences awaiting those tempted to disobey the law. These approaches are then weighed against the position held by Saint Thomas Aquinas. He maintained that each person is called to live a virtuous life, and therefore, punishment cannot be an end in itself or principally a means to summon

obedience; rather, the formal goal of incarceration should be “medicinal”: to heal the wounds that have led to alienation from oneself, from the community, and from God.

Each question stimulates informed discussion and, not uncommonly, passionate debates as the often taken-for-granted legitimacy of law, judgment, confinement, and punishment are examined and critiqued with perspectives drawn largely from the Judeo-Christian tradition. Students are provoked and even inspired when we learn about how criminal justice was practiced a millennium ago and how its moral framework was dominated by Christian theological concerns. They are first reminded (or made aware) of the radical teaching of Jesus regarding the legitimacy of judging anyone. Then they are both surprised and challenged to learn that most people at that time believed his teachings, the result being that it became virtually impossible to find witnesses who would testify, even against an individual known to have committed a crime. Finally, they are generally astonished to learn that the birth of the jury trial was not a victory of democratic jurisprudence but an attempt by the nobility and magistrates to force common people to hand down punishment or death rather than have that onus—and the need to answer to God for failing to heed the teaching of the Gospel—fall upon themselves.

Conclusion

The class at the jail has affected the lives of those who have taken it in remarkable and life-changing ways. Not only are there a number of formerly confined men and women now pursuing a baccalaureate degree at Manhattan College, but many of the students from our main campus have adjusted their career choices and dedicated themselves to work for social justice and for the reform of our criminal justice system.

From my own perspective, I have been led to see that civic engagement is not an exotic addendum to the “real” activity of intellectual training. It is now apparent that the only education that sticks is that which proceeds from experience. It is in providing such experiences, especially ones that address human suffering and the institutions that legitimate that suffering, as well as the opportunity to reflect upon that experience with those directly affected by it, that we not only become true educators but also use education as the vehicle to personal and social transformation.

Incarcerated Trust: The Challenge of Prison Teaching

James Wetzel, Villanova University

Introduction

I teach philosophy at Villanova University, but as a student of Augustine, I try to be mindful of philosophy's religious dimension, or the reverence that drives, and sometimes shipwrecks, a quest for wisdom. In Spring of 2007, I began teaching a variety of philosophy courses—some foundational, others more specialized—at State Correctional Institute (SCI) Graterford, located thirty-one miles northwest of Philadelphia. Graterford is the largest maximum-security prison in the state of Pennsylvania, holding well over 3,000 men. Villanova has been running a program of college study at Graterford since the early '70s. Our Graterford students can earn either an associate of arts degree or a bachelor's in interdisciplinary studies, though it does take considerably more years to earn a degree in prison than it does on campus. Among the lifers, there is active alumni chapter; they are Villanova's diaspora.

My experience of teaching at Graterford has renewed my faith in the power of a philosophical language to render the inarticulate intuitions of a life's struggle into shareable insights. I will not venture to say that I have thereby become a better teacher, but I have, I think, become a more self-aware one. I am aware, more than I have ever been, that I cannot evade the question my ancestral mentor, Augustine, would have readily embraced. The question, in its most basic form, is this: must I revere, or come to love, those with whom I expect to share a common wisdom?

I am in no rush to embrace this phrasing of the question, being still part of an intellectual culture that mostly distrusts the language of love. In my case, I don't distrust the language as much as I distrust my ability to use it in an illuminating way. And so, for now, I divert to this rephrasing of my question: how much do I need to trust those whom I expect to teach? (Trust and love live in the same neighborhood, but not always in the same house.) In the context of a prison school, where the students are convicts and the sentences are grim, it is easy enough to imagine how trust might be a problem—like a clueless out-of-towner is a problem in a biker bar. But trust, though certainly a problem, turned out not to be the problem I was imagining it to be.

Foundation Course

I didn't come to Graterford with any special training for teaching in a maximum-security SCI. The most I could claim along these lines was a mandatory, all-afternoon orientation session, conducted at the prison by a former correctional officer, and mostly consisting of cautionary notes: don't be naïve; assume that the inmates are better at deceiving you than you are at reading them; don't exchange goods of even the most trivial sort; keep your professional distance; don't make friends; strictly conform to all prison regulations; blow your whistle (supplied at the orientation) if you find yourself in the midst of a violent altercation; don't be a hero. I wasn't sure how to apply all this to teaching human beings ("inmates," as they were being presented to me, didn't seem teachable). And while I certainly took the

orientation seriously, it mainly confirmed for me my sinking suspicion that I had no idea what I was getting into.

I was supposed to be teaching a liberal arts foundation course that coming term: Ethics 2050 – The Good Life: Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems. This is a course that is deeply informed by a Catholic appropriation of Aristotelian ethics, where character counts for more than isolated acts, and it is required of all Villanova undergraduates, the incarcerated ones included. I thought about whether I ought to be teaching the Graterford version of Ethics 2050 differently than were I teaching the course on campus. (Bear in mind that my sole experience of the prison to this point had been my orientation session.)

I decided to shade the course's emphasis on character ethics somewhat differently to reflect my one major—and wholly untested—preconception about what the men's ethical experience, up to and into prison, must have been like. I assumed that if you were serving out a long sentence for a serious crime and yet had sufficient self-possession to qualify for a program of college study, then you would have already done significant work on yourself—work perhaps dramatic enough in its effects to count as a moral conversion of some sort. Assuming you were such a person, surely you would find the neatness of Aristotle's distinction between barbarism and a virtuous community less compelling than an ethical life that passes through chaos and heartbreak and takes root in humility? I consequently structured the course around three core readings: Stephen Mitchell's translation of *The Book of Job*, *The Consolation of Philosophy* of Boethius, and James Baldwin's bluesy novel, *If Beale Street Could Talk*.

The *Job* narrative drives a wedge between culpability and being held responsible, and it suggests that a life of privilege, lived with little self-awareness, is more imprisoning than it seems. The Boethius and the Baldwin reading, each in its own remarkable way, renders the invisible prison of lies and loveless narcissism as terrible as the iron that shackles and confines bodies.

Reading trajectories such as these suggested to me a pedagogical way forward, but I remained worried that the implicit theme of the course—ethics as liberation from a self-imposed prison—would, in the context of an actual SCI, come off as facile and presumptuous. What, after all, did I really know of a place of bars and bolts, constant surveillance, chaotic violence, and coercive authority? Perhaps the invisible prison is, on most days of the week, the lesser evil. I wasn't in a position to assume either way, but what sort of uncertainty is appropriate to venture in a place like Graterford? That, too, I didn't know.

My very first session with my Graterford ethics class proved to be revelatory in a way I did not anticipate, and from there on my assumptions about prison classroom space and my authority within it began to shift. One of the more senior men in the class—an “old head”—introduced himself to me as I entered the room, and I started to fret about book distribution and the course roster (I can get a little obsessive about details). He thanked me on behalf of all the men for having enough faith in them to give of my time and energy and make my way onto their side of the prison walls. I appreciated the gracious gesture of gratitude, but I didn't immediately notice what I was being offered.

For you see, Andre (the old head) really *could* speak on behalf of the men in the class. I was not facing a group of mostly disconnected individuals, each with his own independent agenda; I was looking at a community of men with distinct but interdependent roles to honor: old head, young buck, imam, skeptic, activist, artist, educator, organizer—and then some. Over the course of my time at Graterford, I would come to learn something about the imperfect but renewable art of becoming aware, from within prison walls, of who is there with you and of how, when people have left themselves, to fetch them

back. But I always begin with the knowledge that I was, at the start of it all, shown more trust than I was ready, in my self-doubt, to show in return. It is a burden of humility that I am grateful to carry.

Framing Things

Now I want to share a few thoughts about the framework within which I began to view first my Graterford courses—and, then, with a modest leap of the conceptual imagination, much else.

In spring of 2015, I joined forces with Ron Hill, a friend and colleague of mine from Villanova's School of Business, to teach a new course to be offered both at Graterford and on campus. The course was called Philosophy of the Social Venture, and its basic conception was the design of three doctoral students in philosophy and an intrepid MBA. These four met regularly to work on the course, and our charge to them had been to put together a set of readings and a structure that would bring business students, philosophers, and Graterford men into a common conversation about the possibilities of a postconsumer economy where growth is tied less to consumption and more to consciousness.

This would not be the first time I would teach with Ron at the interstices of the university and the SCI, business and the humanities. Two years prior we had taught a course together on the value assumptions that lend monetary exchanges their curiously absolute quality, as if a means of representing value were to have become a value in itself. In the Social Venture course, more directed at the notion of economy itself, I was particularly eager to explore the ambivalence (or outright contradiction) that seemed to me to lie at the heart of a moneyed economy. Money is valued for its capacity to manage trust; most of us are well acquainted with the practice of exchanging goods or services for a symbol of value, the redemption of which we trust anyone in our economy to honor. But it may be claimed with equal force that money is the opposite of trust; it quantifies the needs that (seem to) motivate human interdependency and replaces trust with the exploitable *need* for trust.

Roughly halfway through Social Venture, Joshua Dubler (also writing in this issue of *Spotlight*)—a discerning student of religious life at Graterford and a former adjunct teacher in the Graterford program—accepted my invitation to visit our two student constituencies. On the road from Villanova to Graterford, he asked me an important question that, to my surprise, I realized I had never asked myself before. He wanted to know whether I generally felt it necessary, when I was teaching in prison, to make the prison part of the lesson.

Not long into my teaching at Graterford, I had become aware of “mass incarceration” not simply as a reference to crowded prison conditions, but as the name of a crisis in the criminal justice system and, more broadly, in American political culture. The crisis to which I refer has much to do with the fact that criminality has come to be regarded by many in the culture as an indelible identity and a type of disfigured humanity, and no longer a temporary persona able to be set aside once a person has, through some combination of suffering and education, become trustworthy again.

In Social Venture, I was beginning to see the linkage between the cultural archetype of the criminal and the consumer economy that values the exploitable need for trust over trust itself. Since I am of a mind to think that trust and not need is the true driver of education, I am also inclined to think that as long as I have to teach in a contrary economy, the prison has to be part of the lesson.

The Trust Problem

So here is a way to put the problem of trust structurally: Within prison walls, Graterford students are students and not criminals; outside prison walls, Graterford students are security risks and so criminals

once more. When I try to harmonize these two views of the same men, I seem left with two choices. I can assume that they are trustworthy only when made to suffer the restraints and deprivations of a prison environment, or I can entertain the possibility that we are struggling as a culture with a myth of indelible criminal identity. At the root of this myth we are likely to find a tangle of entrenched assumptions about economy, social value, and human difference, much of which a university, conscious of its higher calling, will not want to endorse.

I am not suggesting that the choice between my two options is neat and self-evident. I am suggesting that the university cannot venture into prisons without putting the quality of its trust to the test. This, to my mind, is an indispensable test. For perhaps the best reason for a university to be in a prison lies in its resolute and collective desire not to become one.

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Quotes, Notes, Questions

Joshua Dubler, University of Rochester

Introduction

Last fall, I taught the course Theories of Religion to students at New York's Auburn Prison through the Cornell Prison Education Program (CPEP). As funded through a recent grant from the Mellon Foundation, CPEP is in the process of expanding its program from two facilities to four and is assembling a consortium of area schools to participate in it. The University of Rochester, where I am an assistant professor of religion, is one of these schools.

I required my Auburn students to complete a weekly writing assignment. Below, I present the assignment in full, as it appeared on the syllabus, with notations to follow.

- Weekly writing assignments¹ will consist of three quotes, three notes, and three questions from and about the assigned text. A few words on each:
 - A quote is a passage from the assigned text. A quote may be as long as a paragraph or as short as a word. In selecting your passages, you should choose quotes that help you to illuminate something important in the text. You may feel like you “get” the quotation perfectly, or the quotation may make no sense to you whatsoever.² Either is okay. (Please note page numbers.)
 - A note is an observation or extended meditation about the text. Notes may comment on the text's language, style, tone, or bias.³ They may attempt to explicate something complicated, call into relief an unstated premise, or argue for a limitation or implication of the author's argument. Your obligation in your notes is not to be “right,” but rather to be thoughtful and probing of the text.
 - A question is a *textual* question.⁴ That is, it is not a biographical or historical question that might be adjudicated through outside research.⁵ It is rather a question about what something in the text *means, does, or commits* the author to.
- In writing up your weekly writing assignments, you will likely find it easiest and most fruitful to sew your quotes, notes, and questions together. That is: choose a pregnant passage, transcribe it, analyze it as best you can, and where your analysis runs aground or leads you someplace provocative, pose a question that you'd like to discuss in class. Repeat twice more and you're done.
- Weekly writing assignments will be judged on quality not quantity. For those looking for guidance, however, I expect your assignments to run in the ballpark⁶ of 500–600 words. Depending, however, among other things on the lengths of your selected quotations, that

estimate might run high or low.

- Weekly writing assignments will be given a grade⁷ of v+, v, or v-. A v+ paper is characterized by probing engagement with a broad selection of textual elements. At times it clarifies, and at others it muddies the waters. It evinces critical thinking, offers original insights, and poses pointed questions. A v paper demonstrates competency with the text. Its selections are considered, but a bit concentrated or safe. Its explications intrigue, but stop short of producing *aha* moments. Its questions are thoughtful, but do not necessarily break significant ground. A v- is a slapdash affair. It evinces the half-baked thinking and ramshackle prose that only a looming deadline can provide. It confuses as much as it enlightens.

QNQ Goals

The Quote, Note, Question (QEQ) has four primary goals. First, in combination with the list of keywords drawn from the week's assignment, which I distribute in advance, it offers a structure for fostering critical reading. Second, by forcing students to put their thoughts down on the page, it is intended to bridge the gap between the privacy of the text and the public space of the classroom. Third, on the theory that conversation moves naturally from the concrete/particular to the abstract/universal, but rarely if ever drifts in the other direction, I use student-selected passages to firmly root class discussion in the text. By doing so, we reinforce together as a group what critical reading looks like in practice, and we pinpoint, assess, and preserve for future usage that week's critical vocabulary. Fourth, as sketches in analytic writing, QEQs serve as incubators for the ideas and arguments that will grow later in the semester into proper analytic essays.

The Quote, Note, Question is a generic assignment. While I vary the number of required QEQs by course level and enrollment, all of my students are required to complete at least one per week. Part of my rationale in presenting this assignment in the present forum then is to implicitly argue the case that a prison classroom is just another classroom. There are important pedagogical and political implications to this position, and to an overwhelming degree it has the advantage of being true. Once you've made it through the baroque security protocols, and navigated the maze of the prison, what you find yourself in is an ordinary classroom with its familiar classroom rhythms, and the prison fades away. But particularities matter. What follows are annotations to the assignment presented above. In these notes, I hope to illuminate for those interested in prison teaching some of what I take to be the unique challenges and opportunities inherent in teaching—and in teaching religion—to incarcerated students.

A few caveats: First, I know for a fact that my undergraduate female TA from the fall never experienced the prison "fading away;" that is to say, my own positioning as a middle-aged man who has spent a fair amount of time in prisons is not incidental to my experiences or correlative judgments. Second, my teaching to incarcerated people has largely been limited to men's prisons with relatively stable populations and robust student cultures. For those teaching in county jails or in other facilities with transient populations, the observations that follow are potentially inapposite. Third, even within this narrow context I address, one encounters a wide range of student personae and attitudes. For every point I make below, I simultaneously hold in mind many who defy the delineated molds.

1. "Weekly writing assignments..."

Courses in prison meet only once per week. Perhaps needless to say, students have no access to online course platforms. In contrast to classes on campus then, where I can receive and process students' responses in advance of class, when teaching in prison this is impossible. What I do

consequently is to divide each class session in two parts. In the session's first half, we return to and discuss for a second time the assigned text from the *previous* week, but now with selected passages and an agenda drawn from their QNQs. Only in the session's second half do we turn to the reading and writing assignments due that day.

2. *"...or the quotation may make no sense to you whatsoever"*

Much of the thrill of teaching incarcerated students (and I say this as someone who has otherwise taught mostly at selected private institutions) is getting to engage with an entirely different set of students than the ones to which I am accustomed. Compared to my students on campus, my incarcerated students bring to the table a very different set of life experiences and perspectives. Nor are they subject to elite academia's standard conventions and mores. This presents additional challenges and obligations—for example, a good number of my incarcerated students struggle in their writing with grammar and syntax—but it also opens up a wonderfully expansive set of textual responses. Does something in the text strike them as preposterous or impenetrable? My incarcerated students generally won't pretend otherwise. In far greater proportion than their on-campus counterparts, as discussants, my incarcerated students provide precise guidance in helping me to clarify that which requires clarification.

3. *"...comment on the text's language, style, tone, or bias"*

Because they have not been acculturated into the pre-professional, middle-class rules of engagement that tend to govern intellectual exchanges in on-campus classrooms, incarcerated students are less likely to mask their own commitments. This makes for especially interesting teaching in the case of religion. In prose and in class, I've had students categorically dismiss religion in crude secularist terms, and I've had students testify to their god. On occasion, a student has made a direct play for my soul. I won't say this sort of boundary obliviousness/refusal is always welcome, but it is indicative of this: to a startling degree, for my incarcerated students, classroom learning is no mere exercise. The paucity of other opportunities for nourishment and growth is in this regard surely partially determinative. But as incarcerated people, my students tend to feed off of and feed back into the pedagogical encounter in holistic and soulful ways. In contrast to the norms on campus, what my incarcerated students read, what they write, and what they say is in no way walled off from how they live. Could a humanist ask for anything more from his or her studies?

4. *"...a textual question"*

At the heart of the discipline instilled by the Quote, Note, Question is a mulish insistence that rather than fleeing the text an attentive reader is required to stick around. Incarcerated or not, students are generally reluctant to abide by this imperative. The difficult text is an alien place, a destabilizing place, or a boring place. Better to abandon it for what one already knows, and knows well. This goes double for my incarcerated students, many of whom have come to higher education later in life, and for whom an essay by Saba Mahmood or Cornel West might as well be written in a foreign language. The most studious read them precisely in this way, with a dictionary and pen in hand. Others grab onto the first familiar thing they come across like driftwood in a flood. Because it's my job, and because I believe deeply in the value of such encounters, I try to force them to go further. It sometimes feels ridiculously professional or haughtily imperialist to impose such disciplines onto radically subjugated men. Because I'm a

pragmatist and a softie, I do not defend protocols to the letter. But overall, resisting the urge to relax expectations seems to me like the pedagogically responsible thing to do.

5. *"adjudicated through outside research"*

Incarcerated students have no access to the Internet and limited access to information more generally. In planning one's assignments, one needs to keep this in mind. Depending on local rules and culture, an instructor may be able to supplement research materials as the semester goes on. When doing so, however, one needs to be aware of where the institutional boundaries lie.

6. *"ballpark of 500–600 words"*

Higher education breeds in some incarcerated students a kind of perfectionism. While for many, as is broadly conventional, a word limit provides a ceiling, for others, it's a floor. Regardless of the stipulated parameters, I've found that some students will wildly exceed it. I try to protect these extraordinary students from themselves, but to date they have proven resistant to such protections.

7. *"grades"*

On campus, I don't generally give weekly assignments grades. The first time I taught in a prison, I began by not grading them there either. However, early feedback suggested that my anti-hierarchical aversion to grades was making my students uneasy. So I started giving grades. Further feedback indicated that students wanted not only grades, but an honest grade range that clearly—and widely—distinguished excellent work from less excellent work. For a time, I came to oblige this preference as well.

Conclusion

Public advocacy for prison education generally focuses on the power of education to effectively reduce recidivism and to assist formerly incarcerated people with social reintegration. These effects are real, but the reasons to get into teaching incarcerated people go well beyond such narrowly measurable outcomes. As with our students on campus, humanities education is an intrinsic good that fosters for incarcerated people aspects of the good life regardless of their conditions. It says something about where we are as a society that carceral spaces are one of the few sites where the humanities are thriving, but that's where we are.

Teaching in prisons isn't revolutionary, but it's not nothing either. As American citizens, we are at our most complicit with mass incarceration when we allow the rigid barrier between the incarcerated and the free to stand unchallenged. By bridging these boundaries and by bringing incarcerated people into our institutional lives, we whittle away at the dehumanizing invisibility on which mass incarceration depends. Along the way, those who teach in prisons discover just how extraordinary these teaching experiences turn out to be.

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<http://religionandincarceration.com/>

Theology and Ministry at Garden State Correctional Facility

Melanie Webb, Princeton Theological Seminary

Introduction

Do you think the seminary would ever want to teach us?

In 2013, I first cotaught a college class at a New Jersey state prison, Garden State Correctional Facility, in Bordentown. The course was in literature, but one of my students noticed from the syllabus that my institutional affiliation was with a seminary. He pulled me aside in the middle of the semester and said, “Mel, I notice that you’re at Princeton Seminary. I’m a theologian, and I’m the choir director here. Do you think the seminary would ever want to teach us?” I stared at him in silence, taken aback by the simplicity of his request to be taught by the seminary as any other faith leader might be taught.

The seminary’s mission is, after all, “to prepare women and men to serve Jesus Christ,” and here stood before me a man serving Jesus Christ who was asking to be better prepared for that ministry. Yet the possibility of offering a seminary-accredited course for students who had yet to complete their BAs was not within reach. I knew the answer to his question was not, “No,” but did not know how it could be “Yes.” I began considering what programs the seminary offered that required a high school education or the equivalent and that did not involve a residential component.

Also in 2013, I began teaching in the theology and ministry certificate program offered by Continuing Education at Princeton Seminary. The program is designed for lay leaders who are active in ministry and able to participate in the program online, either from their home or by joining a cohort hosted by a local church where students gather for weekly live online sessions. The program consists of six five-week classes in major areas of seminary study (Old Testament, New Testament, theology, history, practical theology, and ethics). The online certificate in theology and ministry provided a clear pathway to beginning an educational venture in a prison within a short time frame.

When, in February 2014, I approached the new associate dean of continuing education, Dayle Rounds, about launching a cohort site at a local prison, she responded enthusiastically. By the end of that same week, she got the green light from the seminary’s president, and I approached the chaplain supervisor at Garden State Correctional Facility, Reverend Charles Atkins, Jr. Reverend Atkins also happens to be an alumnus of the seminary, and he started working at that prison as part of his field education experience in the late '90s.

The CTM-Inside Program

Together we began to imagine what role the program might have within the faith community at Garden State. We planned to invite lay leaders from local area congregations to enroll in the cohort at the prison, having them travel to Garden State every Friday evening for class. The cohort at Garden State, then, would consist of leaders in the congregation at the prison and leaders from congregations in the surrounding area. Our hope was that the program could facilitate interaction among congregational leaders in several different faith communities—a vital component of the program experience for our 140+ online students every year.

The CTM-Inside program is an extension site that is part of the current Certificate in Theology and Ministry Program (CTM), which in 2013 and 2014 was offered exclusively online to individual students and to those participating in cohort sites. CTM-Inside functions as an additional cohort site that consists of a combination of incarcerated (inside) and community (outside) students, and it is moderated in person by members of the seminary's teaching staff. The teaching staff and outside students enter the facility together for class meetings with inside students.

Program Structure and Pedagogy

When going behind the prison walls with this program, we did not want to bring a team of volunteers who viewed themselves as offering something to wayward convicts in need of some “good time” on their record. The prison is so effective in drawing a boundary through our imagined communities—or erasing our awareness of those imprisoned altogether—that we can be easily seduced by the emphasis that *we* on the outside have something that *they* on the inside need—or that *we* know anything about them at all. To counteract this bias, we designed a program where each participant cultivates the conditions of a mutual learning environment and where the questions and materials under discussion invite everyone to bring their wisdom and their uncertainties into conversation. An inside student has said that the program “allows us to get a sense of how the body of Christ looks outside prison. The diversity of thought and personality makes CTM a pleasurable experience. I think that it also positively affects the outside participants because they get a chance to see that those of us on the inside are just like them.” Each participant encounters anew the materials required for a certificate in theology and ministry, and together they work to deepen their understanding of and critical engagement with the Christian tradition and its implications for their own lives and ministries.

Such an approach is premised on the proclamation that “the dividing wall of hostility has come down” (Eph. 2:14), and we are invited to enter God's presence by being present to and with one another. While the curriculum for the online students and the Garden State cohort shares many points of continuity, the teaching staff, which consists of MDiv and PhD students, adapts it for the distinctive learning environment that we forge together at the prison. The online classroom is not accessible from within New Jersey prisons, so all class sessions for the cohort at Garden State are conducted in person. We develop our capacity for mutual recognition and appreciation by arranging our classroom space in a circle and, at least once in a class session, asking a question or giving a prompt to which each participant responds. In the first class session, teaching staff and students name and discuss the expectations and

aspirations that will animate our year together. This involves drafting a class covenant that shapes how we structure our time each week and that we revise throughout the year.

Based on the class covenant, the teaching staff reviews lessons delivered by faculty in the online classroom for the prison classroom. Each faculty member in the program attends one session in person at the prison, and works with teaching staff to prepare for direct engagement with these congregational leaders. For the remaining four sessions in each course, the teaching staff selects portions of the recorded lecture delivered to the online cohort and then conducts discussions related to key topics and at points of intersection with our students' ministries. At other times, instead of watching the recording, we adapt the online lessons so that what was initially delivered in a lecture format might be discovered together in focused conversation.

By studying theology and ministry in a prison context and cultivating a hospitable environment for one another, we experience personal and communal transformation together. Both non-incarcerated and incarcerated participants share the identity of Christian faith leader and, in our program, student. An inside student, reflecting on his experience of the first class session, said that, "It was a beautiful thing to see so many people from not only the inside and outside but from so many different walks of life come together for the glory of God." By designing a space in which incarcerated status is not the most salient difference, other, deeper aspects of each student's distinctive qualities and interests can then rise to the surface and contribute to the diverse classroom space that is so necessary to both democratic education and Christian formation.

We set this trajectory towards practices of mutual recognition by interviewing each applicant in person. For the prospective outside students, we plan for a fifteen-minute interview that allows members of the teaching staff time to converse with the applicant, to hear what drew them to this opportunity, and to discuss the emphasis on collaboration and mutuality within the program. Often, this means emphasizing the identity of "student" that they will share with all others in the cohort. For many applicants, this is an unexpected aspect of the program—that they are not primarily coming to minister but also to be ministered to, and to minister with those who are incarcerated and learn about ministry from them. As one outside student who completed the 2015 program described the first day of class: "It was also a 'God Moment' for me when I realized that the inside student sitting next to me wanted to do youth ministry, which is my calling too!" Our outside students are active in a variety of ministries as well—youth ministry, choir, building and grounds care, family counseling, volunteer coordination, and running a homeless shelter.

For the prospective inside students, we work closely in collaboration with the chaplain at the prison, Reverend Atkins, who has designed a three-month program called "Logos," which is a skill-based program that draws on incarnational theology to teach participants how to attend to their spiritual, physical, mental, and social well-being during their incarceration and anticipate the challenges that they will face upon re-entry. Applicants must complete this program prior to entering the Certificate in Theology and Ministry Program, and the seminary relies on Reverend Atkins to guide us in admissions decisions.

The students at Garden State have many different areas of ministry, including as facilitators for the Alternatives to Violence Program (offered by a local Quaker chapter), teaching assistants for the Logos program, discussion leaders in Bible studies, spoken word artists who perform edifying and original poems in Sunday services, choir members, and clerks of the chapel. Their involvement in, for example, the plumbing department, inmate legal association, the kitchen, and college program are also understood as sites of their ministry, as well as the relationships they have with “bunkies” and on their tiers. The impact of the 2015 students’ ministries was evident when, in conducting interviews with inside students for the 2016 cohort, we asked, “Tell us about one person who has had a positive impact on your spiritual life.” Many of the applicants named men in the 2015 cohort, whose theological insight, mentorship, and pastoral care had challenged and grounded them in their faith.

The cohort at Garden State is also unique in that, unlike other combined cohort programs, the outside students do not come from among those who have matriculated at Princeton Seminary. Rather, they are lay leaders in communities of faith across the mid-Atlantic. With one in 100 citizens imprisoned at any given time, America has one of the highest rates of incarceration of any nation—this makes incarceration a common part of the American experience and an important area of concern for the American church. By fostering relationships among committed Christians who serve their communities both inside and outside America’s prisons, CTM–Inside seeks to strengthen the American church for responding to the theological, pastoral, and social challenges encompassed within and reflected by the trenchant realities of mass incarceration. These challenges are so diffuse that we cannot rely only on those with expertise in criminology, the history of incarceration, or policy advocacy to effect the necessary changes. The transformations that will reconstitute our society in the midst and aftermath of mass incarceration must also be diffuse.

Several of our outside students have previously encountered the realities of incarceration. Given that one in twenty people will, at some point in their lives, live under state or federal surveillance, this is not surprising. The interpersonal encounters with incarcerated lay leaders can also be a source of healing and empowerment for them. One outside student reflected on his own family background, his personal renewal, and his pursuit to mend a difficult relationship within his family: “There was a moment when I spoke about the incarceration of my oldest brother and I began to cry because I could not reach him and understand him. But being here has given me a lot of insight into what happens when you are incarcerated and it has prompted me to restart a relationship with my brother.” The practices of mutual recognition that happen within the cohort have an impact that extends beyond the cohort, and can expand the possibilities for empathy with others in one’s life.

Conclusion

When, in spring 2013, the choir director at the prison asked me whether the seminary would teach him and other leaders in the congregation at Garden State, he posed one of the most salient questions for any institution of higher education: “Who are our students?” For a seminary, the answer to that question reflects our own imagination of who is and will contribute to the flourishing of our society and the faith communities within it. Such a question echoes the inquiry once posed to Jesus: “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus’s response then, as now, invites us to dismantle the walls that seek to divide us.

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