

FEATURE--BOOK REVIEW

Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers

Edited by Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Roberson

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Reviewed by June Edwards

Those of us who work in prison education and constantly grapple with the challenge of making our classrooms relevant, welcoming and creative, will find much to think about in *Prison Pedagogies*. Edited by Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Roberson, this fascinating collection of essays explores a range of pedagogical practices that support writing as a form of self-development and cultural resistance.

While *Prison Pedagogies* is partly an academic exploration of contemporary teaching practices that bring agency to in-prison writers, most of the essays are very accessible and offer practical resources for creative work, based on experiences of writing groups in various prisons and detention centres in the US.

Lockard's own contribution to the essays looks at working-class consciousness and posits the notion that prison education and writing programmes are often framed as a way of preventing recidivism and thereby increasing institutional security, rather than as a means of exploring the root causes of incarceration. Lockard reminds us that as prison educators we need to be aware of the class consciousness of our participants, but also of our own class privilege, the sheer privilege of being able to walk out the door at 4pm every day. The question we must ask ourselves, according to Lockard is 'why are you here?' Our motives should not be as educational missionaries hoping to convert our students to 'embourgeoisement', but as facilitators of students' social-engagement and self-reflection through writing practices.

In his essay *Creating Literature and Community Organization*, Juan Pablo Parhuc, writes about his work in Argentina. Parhuc's workshops focus on activism and explore how writing and art can be a pathway to social and political involvement.

In *Freedom Within Limits*, Ashwin J Manthripragada looks at strategies for empowerment. He discusses the importance for prison educators to have an awareness of theories and practices of social justice so that we can position ourselves in political resistance with the oppressed rather than side with the colonizing mentality. To achieve this, Manthripragada explores with his students the prejudice and discrimination within language itself. With his students he looks at the academic language which they need to complete assignments, and they dismantle it together, looking at the inherent inequalities in formal language, while acknowledging its use when engaging with those who hold power, be it the prison authorities or institutionalized education. Group work and the democratic classroom is the basis for building trust, writes Manthripragada.

Providing value for tax-payers money and the problem of measuring outcomes in education programmes is the universal challenge that Anna Plemons deals with in *Something Other Than Progress*. Nowhere is this more evident than in prisons, where Plemons says incarcerated people's rehabilitation is being pushed towards job training rather than investing in the creative arts and non-credit programmes. Plemons refers to this as the 'Western obsession with progress, which in some ways has grown out of 'explicit and implicit encouragement of salvation narratives, or tales of linear progress from a negative past to a positive future.'

Plemons discusses the possibilities that arise when we explore programmes that strengthen communities within prison rather than individuals, communities that include staff, management, services and incarcerated. She also talks about programmes in prisons which use 'teaching partners', learning opportunities where those in prison also teach, particularly for English as a Second Language. This more circular methodology gets



away from the notion of the deficit model in which we tend to see people in prison, as lacking knowledge.

Tobi Jacobi's fascinating essay on *Curating Counternarratives Beyond Bars*, looks at her community literacy work with confined adults and youths in northern Colorado in her SpeakOut writing groups.

She talks about the need for imprisoned people to be able to share and document their stories, and to imagine new lives for themselves. However, without a space in which to share and circulate their stories, there is no way for the writers to engage the public or rather counterpublic. Over the course of 12 weeks, her writing group comes together to write, discuss and revise their work, and then they publish their work in the SpeakOut journal. It is this possibility for the work to be received by an audience, and for that audience outside the prison to be challenged by the images of prison and prisoners that counters the perceived narrative of 'the criminal'.

Tasha Golden's work focuses on writing with young, incarcerated women, and she gives some very practical advice about understanding 'trauma informed pedagogy. What is crucial she says is 'laughter, safe space, specificity, familiarity, visuals and imitation.' She also suggests that one shouldn't encourage disclosure of information that you wouldn't be willing to share yourself.

Other excellent advice for literacy facilitators is to let students create their own sentences to punctuate, rather than learning to do it on sentences written by others.

What really emerges from this wonderful collection of essays is the importance of progressive pedagogies that encourage people living in prison communities to have their voice heard, to create and tell their own narratives, and to find agency and self-reflection in their work. But it is also a reminder to prison educators and writing teachers to be aware of our own prejudices and positions of privilege when working on programmes with students.

In the words of Anna Plemons, what incarcerated students need is "...teachers willing to show up, show respect, bring their own best work, and teach what they know."

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