PRACTITIONER PAPER

Teaching Humanities Research in Under-Resourced Carceral Environments

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Abstract: *Humanities courses make up a large portion of higher education courses offered in United States carceral facilities. However, many of these facilities lack the academic resources necessary to support the research assignments traditionally assigned in a humanities course, from research papers common in introductory courses to the undergraduate theses completed by many humanities majors. This paper outlines a case study in adapting a humanities research assignment to function in a prison lacking digital and physical research resources, with particular attention to the assignment's potential to promote student confidence, independent learning, and autonomy. The author surveys the instructor's role in promoting "Inquiry-Based Learning," a pedagogy that emphasizes active learning, and the challenges that the prison environment presents in helping students take on the role of active researcher. Finally, the paper considers the long-term benefits of preserving research assignments despite the logistical obstacles, particularly for students pursuing further higher education after release.*

Keywords: *humanities research; educational resources; student autonomy; Taconic Correctional Facility*

Every aspect of a college course is altered by the material realities of the prison environment, but research-based learning is particularly affected. For instructors of introductory humanities courses, frequently tasked with teaching academic research and information literacy, adapting research assignments to the prison environment is central to a successful course. This is particularly urgent considering the prominent place humanities instruction retains within prison curricula in the United States, where courses requiring humanities and social science research skills continue to make up a significant segment of course offerings. In many US states, however, incarcerated students do not have access to resources necessary for conducting research. Asher (2006), Sorgert (2014), and DeLano Davis (2017) document myriad programs designed to increase academic resources in prison libraries, but note their limited reach; in Asher's words "many facilities are neither funded nor stocked to provide resources for academic research." This reality has multiple detrimental effects. In my own course, it created substantial obstacles to offering students transferable academic credit, a problem which, writ large, threatens to limit prison education programs. Even more deleteriously, material limitations to research can offer incarcerated students painful reminders of the resources denied by the prison system.

This essay offers a case-study of strategies for confronting two persistent barriers to teaching research skills in an under-resourced carceral environment. First, without sufficient research material at their disposal, instructors must find other avenues for teaching students how to seek out, evaluate, and select proper sources for a research-based assignment. Second, without these resources, incarcerated students risk being deprived of one of the most self-directed assignments offered in any humanities course, in which student-directed research replaces reading and responding to work chosen and assigned by an instructor. This independent

work is central to any college education, but it is particularly important for incarcerated students faced with the loss of personal agency that the American carceral system creates. These strategies, drawn from my experience teaching at Taconic Correctional Facility in Bedford Hills, New York, can help prison instructors replicate many of the benefits of on-campus research, complementing the necessary political advocacy to provide incarcerated students with needed academic resources.

Inquiry-Based Learning in the Prison Classroom

This research assignment was offered as part of University Writing, Columbia University's required introductory course in academic writing, which was being taught for the first time in a prison facility. The ten enrolled students, ranging from students with extensive prison education experience to those who were taking their first ever college class, had ably navigated the first two units of the course-a textual analysis paper focusing on a single, assigned essay and a longer paper considering multiple essays in conversation with one another; from a material resources perspective, these assignments required only that I distribute a few assigned texts. The third unit, tasked with introducing students to both the principles of academic research and the resources available to them for conducting it, required substantially more intervention. For many university students, research-based assignments represent the first serious introduction to Inquiry-Based Learning, in which, as Blessinger and Carfora (2014, p. 5) put it, "the learner moves from a passive to an active participant in the learning process, [and] the instructor also moves from being an isolated subject matter expert to an instructional leader, learning architect, and learning guide and mentor." In the campus environment, students are enabled as active learners by finding research material in an academic library or online databases, and subsequently fashioning an argument from these materials, while an instructor teaches relevant research skills to help students complete these tasks. The first challenge in adapting the research assignment to the prison environment is replicating this experience of student discovery without having research resources at their disposal. In other words, simply assigning materials, as I had done in the first two units, would deprive students of the ability to do Inquiry-Based Learning. Independent source discovery must be incorporated.

Generating Research Questions

As the task of generating research questions is both an entirely new skill for many students, and of crucial importance for the success of the research assignment, I devoted an entire two-hour class to helping students move from broad topical interests to specific database search phrases. I began by introducing two relevant frameworks for student research. First, the well-known approach of Booth et al (2008), a methodology that exhorts student researchers to start from the position of "local expert," a practice that supports student autonomy by helping students imagine research as a self-driven activity emerging from personal expertise, rather than a sterilized process of combing through sources on whatever topic an instructor deems important (Booth et al 2008, p. 41). To further encourage student-researcher autonomy, I introduced excerpts of Crist and Miles's research on "narrative inquiry," a "genre that originates as personal inquiry into a significant issue for the student and imbues it with social and cultural analysis" (Crist and Miles, 2018, p. 225). Using these principles, students then started generating preliminary research questions they wanted to pursue over the course of a multi-week assignment. Often, students used the combined principles of local expertise and narrative inquiry to bring together their own personal experiences and themes from previously-assigned readings, to create unique research topics that they were personally invested in.

One student's experience highlights the challenges incarcerated learners may face in generating research questions, and ways that these pedagogical tools can help overcome them. This student, having written an earlier assignment that analyzed an assigned excerpt from Matthew Desmond's *Evicted,* a 2016 ethnographic study of evictions in several American cities, was interested in further studying eviction, but was daunted by the vast scope of the topic. To help the

student find a more manageable research question, I suggested using narrative inquiry to consider a space of particular personal interest as a starting-point. The student eventually decided to connect the issue of housing eviction to poverty rates in three New York City neighborhoods; this led to database search phrases such as "eviction and poverty rates in East Harlem" and "eviction rates and school attendance in New York City." As this example shows, encouraging students to generate research questions from personal investments, in addition to promoting student autonomy throughout the assignment, can help generate "right-sized" research questions that students can pursue within the limits of a single assignment; having an inquiry of manageable scope can in turn make research assignments feel significantly less intimidating to students.

Replicating the Database Search

At this juncture, the assignment requires substantial instructor adaptation to best replicate how a research paper would be taught with significant academic research resources available. Having worked with students to generate research topics and search keywords, an instructor may now enter those terms into both a primary source and secondary source database. Instructor flexibility when selecting databases plays an important role in generating useful research results for students, as students generating topics by considering their personal expertise will almost inevitably produce research questions ranging across humanities and social science fields. In my course, student research topics often crossed disciplinary boundaries. One student, for instance, undertook a research paper that studied historical shifts in public attitudes toward Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). This project, the student recognized, would benefit from both sociological research on public opinions about SIDS as well as humanities research in the fields of History of Medicine and Science to help understand why these shifts happened. An instructor limiting the student's searches to field-specific databases would limit the student's project, and instructors should bear this in mind when conducting searches on behalf of students. In my case, I settled on the widely-available ProQuest Central to search primary sources and either JSTOR or Web of Science for secondary sources; instructors may need to adapt these choices to suit other student research topics. Sorting under the heading "Relevance," I selected and printed the first ten results in both primary and secondary sources, compiled them in order of search return, and prepared a packet of research material for each student.

This sample, of course, was much smaller than the numerous resources a student could access on campus, but it enabled students to complete a series of relevant assignments on source evaluation (e.g. identifying distinguishing characteristics of primary and secondary sources) as well as function (e.g. considering different ways research sources can contribute to arguments). With research material in front of them, students could also learn citation practices and strategies for avoiding plagiarism. Crucially, it gave students control over choosing what research material to write about; since the assignment required they use four primary and four secondary sources, student researchers were in charge of selecting the most valuable sources for their argument from the larger sample. With database results distributed, I as instructor took on the role of supporting, rather than directing, student research. For instance, one student researching childhood narratives of homelessness asked for further information on historical rates of childhood eviction, and we worked together to create follow-up search terms that I could search on the student's behalf.

Outcomes

In total, the research assignment required five weeks: one for generating research questions; one for digesting and analyzing research material; two for composing a draft and conducting follow-up research; and, a final week for revisions. All ten students successfully completed research essays. Topics ranged widely, from an analysis of the influence of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on "right to counsel" laws, to a study of the effects of gentri-

fication on racial segregation in the Northeastern United States. In one notable, unforeseen benefit, the essays revealed that students had "traded" sources among one another—the student researching the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for instance, shared sources on housing and human rights law with colleagues researching eviction and homelessness. The ability to share resources with one another added another element of student autonomy and camaraderie to the assignment. While the sample of ten students is small, this group has gone on to notable educational success; two students from this introductory class in 2018 have already completed entire undergraduate degrees at Taconic.

Potential Challenges

This assignment has the potential to help promote student empowerment, a learning experience of deep importance to incarcerated students. This will not happen automatically, however; instructors play a key role in ensuring that the assignment actually achieves this goal. From a student perspective, this assignment can seem similar to any other course assignment conducted in a carceral facility: an instructor brings in material for students to read, helps them digest and respond to it, and directs them to complete a writing assignment. The instructor therefore must make apparent the shift that Blessinger and Carfora describe from authority to "instructional leader, learning architect, and learning guide and mentor." Without this shift, the instructor will have difficulty allowing students to engage in what Behan (2014, p. 26) calls the "uncomfortable, ambiguous, tentative, uncertain and evolving" critical thinking that is necessary for helping students develop agency in the prison environment. In my course, I had become aware of this dynamic during earlier units focused on close reading and textual analysis; students frequently composed responses that departed significantly from the texts they had been assigned, implicitly signaling that they were eager to explore their own intellectual interests as part of the course, and my role in maintaining student focus on material that I had assigned could feel constraining.

While Gordon (2019, p. 164) has pointed out that alleviating this authoritative dynamic remains a problem even for prison instructors who attempt to "craft lessons that invite and encourage student inquiry and build activities around collaborative investigation and dialogue," humanities research offers one avenue forward through its emphasis on research as a conversational practice among scholar-peers. The framework of "research as conversation" has particular benefits in prison classrooms. The conversation model, where primary and secondary sources serve not only as experts or authorities but also as interlocutors whose positions a student-researcher can challenge, modify, or support, can decenter the authority of "expert" sources without the perceived risk of pushing back against writing assigned by an instructor, which students often feel may negatively impact their standing in the course. For students without access to research resources, any material assigned by an instructor, however compelling, carries the mark of authority, since it has been deemed "acceptable" material for incarcerated people to study by an outside figure. By giving students the ability to evaluate, critically respond to, and even disagree with research sources, a humanities research assignment can reframe student relationships to texts, even if an instructor cannot fully shed the authoritative position placed on them in the prison environment.

Conclusion

It bears repeating that a modified assignment cannot obviate the need for improved academic resources in United States prisons. Nonetheless, the benefits of adapting humanities research assignments greatly outweigh the difficulties. For many prison students, their educational goals include not only learning skills and content but also preparing for continued pursuit of higher education after release. In order to be successful in this transition, students must have been equipped with independent research skills, skills that they will frequently be assumed to have by their future university instructors. The costs of not teaching students these research skills go beyond the academic. Even under supportive circumstances, research assignments

often produce significant student anxieties. These feelings, when compounded by other stigmas faced by formerly incarcerated students, have the potential to derail educational success, especially if they give formerly-incarcerated students the impression that the education they received was substandard. Teaching humanities research, then, is crucial not only for promoting the academic independence and autonomy of incarcerated individuals, but also for creating space for them in educational settings beyond the prison walls.

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