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A Student-Centered Approach to Prison Reform

The National Institute of Justice published a study in 2014 that states that 76.9 percent of prisoners were rearrested within 5 years of their release, over fifty percent of those within the first year alone (Cooper, Durose, & Snyder). Numerous studies have found that education and employment are the most crucial factors in combatting recidivism (Lockwood, Nally, Ho, & Knutson). Yet, prison education programs are some of the first to lose funding when budget cuts are made (Forman 14-15). We know that education is an essential component that the incarcerated population needs to succeed both outside and within the walls of a prison. Of course, those who commit crimes must serve their debt to society. However, serving one's debt to society does not mean being stripped of basic human rights. If we want released incarcerated individuals to return to life outside of prison as rehabilitated, enlightened, healthy human beings, we need to support programs that help them claim and exercise their fullest humanity (Bender). Education programs have been shown not only to reduce recidivism, but also to enhance cognitive, emotional, and even physical well-being. I propose, then, that we do everything in our power to extend those educational opportunities.

Prisoners are one of the most-often forgotten groups in our society today; they are the discarded, the unwanted, the "dangerous." Our society has decided collectively that it is easier to lock these individuals up far removed from public view than to recognize them as human beings with individual needs and interests who deserve a say in their own lives. I have to admit, before I began my course on the Rhetorical Theory of Mass Incarceration last year, I saw the prison system as very far removed from myself. I was settled in relative indifference because of my lack of exposure on the subject. However, after delving into the reading list for the course and studying the system from the inside out, I was no longer privy to the blissful ignorance that I held before. I was

floored by the horrific practices keeping the system of mass incarceration in place in my own community and across the nation.

I wondered why prison reform was not at the forefront of modern political discourse. The answer that I find most frequently is that discussing prison makes people uncomfortable. To me, the obvious solution to alleviate this discomfort and initiate change is to open a collaborative discussion between the prisoners and those who are pulling them into the system. We cannot hope to make any recognizable difference in the corrupt, divisive societal construct that is mass incarceration if we refuse to discuss it. However, when we do finally begin to discuss this issue, the voices that we forget to include most often are the ones that would be most directly affected by our proposed changes — the prisoners themselves. Our job, as persons who have access to means and education necessary to make a difference in the lives of those who are incarcerated, is to reach out and help these individuals develop the confidence to feel that they have a voice and can use it. We are responsible for listening. Through education projects, we must give them the opportunity to be heard. When my classmates and I were encouraged by our rhetorical theory professor, Dr. Diana Eidson, to create a final project that would take what we had learned beyond our classroom, I knew that I wanted my project to be centered on education. I realized that I had found my own sense of agency through education, and I wanted to spread that feeling to a population where confidence and agency are essential to their well-being.

Our class readings included research from David Coogan and Kevin Farley on the “Rhetoric of Mass Incarceration,” in which they explain, “...[the prisoners] wanted to be free, but the real bulwark between [the prisoners] and freedom was not these prison walls, it was these internal prisons, these ideological prisons, these cultural prisons. In the writing, they shaped the art of liberation” (Coogan and Farley 5). Imagine if there was a way that we could provide at least a sliver of confidence to anyone made to feel helpless by the hegemonic power structure to which they are

subjected. What if we treated incarcerated people as subjects: granting them the authority and responsibility of their own stories and education? What if we could create an environment where we advocate for their individuality instead of enacting the oppressive uniformity they experience everywhere else? As a consultant for the Miller Writing Center at Auburn University, I considered the goals of our program and thought, what better way to develop agency in education than through a writing center?

I began research to develop my own practicum for putting such a program into place. As I collected research on the system of mass incarceration in the United States, I noticed similarities between my writing center training and the objectives of prison education reform projects (North). Both aim to promote communicative agency and provide means to improve students' quality of life. In the Miller Writing Center, we strive for these goals in every session. Because the focus of each consultation is on the *writer* and not one piece of *writing*, students in prison education projects would benefit from interacting with the writing center even if they couldn't take their projects beyond the prison walls. Regardless of subject, the projects these students would bring in could act as a different headspace — helping them escape momentarily and engage with the world around them, or at least engage more openly with the one that they are experiencing. This concept applies not only to individuals who will eventually be released from prison, but to those who are serving a life-sentence, as well. In our training for the Miller Writing Center, we consultants discuss the critical roles we play, not only for academic pursuits, but for emotional support. Improving someone's confidence in their ability to create and communicate opens the door for improved morale, self-esteem, and reduced stress.

To effectively describe the program I am creating, I want to first give you my definition of a writing center. From my involvement, I would define the writing center as a collaborative workspace where students are encouraged to engage constructively with their own work. The goal in each

consultation is to make each student feel more confident than when they came in, and in order to create this empowerment, we work to challenge the “complacent rhythm of writing” that we all so often fall into (North 54). Some of the specific techniques that we use during consultations to defy conventions are being inquisitive and curious about the students’ work, actively listening to the writer’s thoughts on their process, gauging and addressing their attitudes toward their work, encouraging students to ask questions, and most importantly, taking inventory of their needs so that the students ‘carry the torch’ in the consultation. Writing center consultants essentially act as the means through which a student can cultivate their thoughts and ideas to bring them to fruition. The purpose of student-oriented consultations is to provide students with the ideological freedom to explore and create in a safe space free from judgement.

One’s ideology is the lens through which they see the world — a set of ideas and ideals that govern one’s beliefs. The goal of a writing center is to allow students ideological freedom, which welcomes new perspectives and, most importantly, allows students to represent their own ideologies in their work. Ideological freedom not only contributes to one’s sense of confidence in pursuing higher education, but also sparks agency in communication, which incarcerated students can use to better disclose their needs and advocate for reform within their own institutions. In all likelihood, we have all felt at some point in our lives that we did not have control over the circumstances that govern our everyday actions, but hardly anyone feels helplessness more so than prisoners. George Jackson, a political activist and well-known advocate for prison reform, recalls, in his collection of letters published in *Soledad Brother*, that he feels “cramped within this cloud of ignorance which has been placed about [him] purposely to act against [his] interests” (Jackson 59-60). Jackson’s vulnerable admission of his feelings of dehumanization while incarcerated reflects the repressive tactics of the system of mass incarceration in the United States.

Using the methodology of a writing center, we can combat this dehumanization by encouraging engagement in education and communication that goes beyond the traditional classroom setting. Currently, writing centers and prison education projects operate independently, but I believe that the combination of these two programs would create a learning environment highly conducive to creating ideological freedom and to enhancing students' education. The project I propose would give prisoners a space to feel engaged in personal projects to promote the empowerment necessary to develop, if not a physical freedom, an ideological freedom, or 'agency.' Promoting agency would give people in prisons the ability to communicate their true thoughts and feelings, but also give them confidence that they are being listened to and really heard. My goal is to implement writing centers as essential elements to prison education programs, beginning by bringing tutors into correctional facilities, and transitioning to a model where the students in the facilities become the tutors themselves. Through this method of organization, the students can be exposed to the benefits of writing center tutoring by experiencing its enlightening effects both as tutors and clients. Understanding the methodology of writing center consultations from both the client and tutor perspectives provides a closer look into why we make encouragement our priority. From my personal experience, this positive tutoring mentality extends to and shapes how one approaches everyday interactions.

George Jackson serves as a prime example of developing agency as an incarcerated student. In his autobiographical collection of letters, Jackson discusses communication as the key component to reformatory discourse: "Before we can ever face down the foe, we must have long since learned to share, trust, communicate, and live harmoniously with each other" (109). In order to encourage this communication, I propose implementing writing center methodology to prison education projects to give incarcerated students a space to immerse themselves in their individual learning process through subject matter in which they have a vested interest. Through an education project that includes

writing center practicum, we can work alongside incarcerated students to help them develop this “critical consciousness.” My definition of critical consciousness for the purpose of this discussion is: a method of thinking that urges students to question their social and historical situation. This understanding elicits integral self-reflection that requires nuanced awareness of one’s own ideological associations as well as the assumptions of academic discourse (Bawarshi and Pelkowski). As Anis Bawarshi and Stephanie Pelkowski relate in “Postcolonialism and the Idea of a Writing Center,” critical consciousness helps us move from being presented knowledge to “knowing,” and this transition helps us achieve “exteriority,” which aligns with the concept of agency (44).

Traditional education, with lessons in a classroom setting and a single instructor teaching a set curriculum, is an incredible asset. It provides opportunities for inclusion in academic discourse for incarcerated students who are able to utilize those resources. Current prison education projects, such as the Alabama Prison Arts and Education Project, offer classes for collegiate course credit, GED programs, creative writing programs, and so much more. However, the traditional classroom has a hegemonic structure that requires students to consent to the domination of their ideas by “academic” discourse rather than “encourag[ing] them to think critically about their own language and pursue growth through the means that they feel express their ideas most effectively” (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 50-51). One way that I propose accomplishing this growth is, in addition to implementing writing centers in prison education projects, leading students to pursue a “passion project.”

A passion project, in the context that I am discussing, is a course of self-education in which students select an area of interest or topic that intrigues them and are given the resources possible to immerse themselves in an individualized project. From an ideological perspective, a passion project fits the idea of developing agency and empowerment through education entirely. The key difference between traditional curriculum-driven education courses and more individualized academic pursuits

is that traditional classes often operate under a veil of acculturation. This can hinder the student's ability to engage in open discourse, as their thoughts and habits could potentially be acculturated to university or institutional standards (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 44). The non-directive structure of a writing center would allow students to pursue their individual interests, which contributes to the sense of academic agency, by not requiring students to conform to a specific standard of "success" in academic writing or discourse (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 47). Traditional classrooms contain leading materials and coursework that are filtered by the dominating culture (Knopp and Bale 20), and the writing center would provide an alternate style of discourse to compare or add to the information that students are learning in the classroom. Students have a right to their own language and cognitive capacities (CCC LPC), so one of the goals of the writing center as a whole is to eliminate the misconception that there must be a "universal standard" for "good" writing (Denny 38). An in-facility writing center would allow the students access to academic support and a means for collaborative learning through peer-oriented consultations. While we do help students at all levels of traditional literacy, our focus is not to "correct" — we are much more concerned with empowering and guiding writers to feel more comfortable with writing as a practice so that they can continually develop skills they could use outside of a writing center setting.

The passion project connects students' linguistic diversity with their critical consciousness. Within the classroom, critical consciousness elicits an awareness of not only one's personal ideology but the ideological principles of the academic community with which he or she is communicating (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 43). Not every student has a natural affinity for academic discourse, so in order to include a larger population, we must develop a structure that caters more fluidly to individual students. The passion project promotes academic interest in a more individualized and adaptable manner. It encourages students to pursue topics that are significant to them, while presenting their own information in an academic context. However, because knowledge remains

trivial if learners cannot communicate it and engage with it in a larger context, students' ability to interact within an academic discourse community is essential to their sense of self-awareness (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 52). Including the writing center with existing education programs would allow students to pursue both their "home" and academic discourses. When students can reposition themselves within various types of discourses, they have developed a sense of agency in multiple disciplines, and that concept is empowering in and of itself (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 53).

Because the writing center model is directed specifically towards including students with all levels of interest and understanding, writing center methodology would be essential to the development of critical consciousness in the incarcerated student population (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 7). Writing centers function in this same way in university settings. One of the main goals of education that parallels writing center pedagogy is to help students develop a genuine understanding of their learning experiences to know how their home discourse has an impact on their interaction with academic discourse. Keeping this motivation in mind, I am not advocating to change every prison education project to writing centers. I am simply advocating to include writing centers in addition to those course-credit-oriented educational opportunities.

Through this program, I wish to provide an outlet for students to engage in academics through their own language. The motto of the Miller Writing Center at Auburn University is "All students. All writing," and I believe that this statement encompasses the goal of outreach for all writing centers, and exactly the atmosphere that writing centers would bring to prison education programs. When considering writing center methodology, Harry C. Denny, author of *Facing the Center: Toward an Identity Politics of One-to-One Mentoring*, argues that the discourse that writing centers engage in with students on a daily basis should enable both students and consultants to "view communication as involving strategic choices over which they ought to have agency" (38). By providing an outlet for students within correctional facilities to develop their academic engagement

through their own language and level of understanding, we could encourage investment in successful writing practices beyond strictly-academic communities that might not have been possible otherwise (Bawarshi and Pelkowski 55). Keeping in mind the benefits that this highly-adaptable structure would bring to prison education, we cannot expect to implement this system effectively without first addressing some of the questions that this type of program would face through its progression.

I would like to encourage suggestions and commentary on all of the information I have presented today, but I would especially like to hear ideas to address these potential challenges I am about to mention. First to consider, and arguably the most important to the success of the program, is learning to navigate the ever-changing tutor-client dynamic. We must be highly aware of our rhetorical position in the tutoring space (Denny 38). We do not need to present ourselves as “experts” or people who are going to analyze and judge every piece of writing that a student brings in. We are *partners* in the educational journey that these students are pursuing, and they need to see that in our demeanor in each consultation. We must also consider the vulnerability that sharing one’s writing requires. As North discusses in his notes on *The Idea of a Writing Center*, tutors are “inserting [themselves] in what is typically a solo ritual” (North 63). People may pour their heart and soul into their work, and we must be cognizant of that. In addition to the social dynamics of the tutoring environment, a potential restriction of implementing a writing center and the passion project program would be obtaining the materials that each student needs to complete their projects to the extent that they desire. Both accessing those resources and having them approved to be brought into the facilities would both require overcoming numerous financial and situational barriers. The aforementioned concerns are just the beginning, and I am sure each day as the program develops will bring new challenges. We will find an ideal rhythm and general praxis for enacting a functional writing center program as we gain experience in the facilities and with new groups of students.

Although the challenges are many, I know that if this project were able to be implemented even on a small scale, we would be moving in the direction of progress for prison education. The practicum of a writing center aims to dismantle the disconnect between academia and the community through the development of critical consciousness (Coogan and Farley 9). This model contributes to restorative justice, in which incarcerated individuals are encouraged to be active participants in their own recovery instead of being objectified as a minuscule piece in the hegemonic structure of the correctional facilities (“Restorative Justice”). We want restorative justice if we ever want the current system to become more beneficial to the prisoners as well as society at large. I would like to leave you with a quote from Harry C. Denny from *Facing the Writing Center*: “Writing centers, I thought, could be sites for activism: organic, sustainable, even broader change could be had there, though it had eluded me elsewhere” (Denny 36). What we do through education projects such as this one can make a difference in people’s lives. Whether slight or completely transformative, I think it is important to do all that we can to contribute to this revolution. Please let me know if you have any questions or thoughts about this project. Thank you for listening.

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