

BOOK REVIEWS

Prison Pedagogies

**Edited by Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson
Syracuse: Syracuse University Press (2018) 272pp.**

Reviewed by Lucas Ridgeway

Teachers matter. The target audience of *Prison Pedagogies* is prison educators, administrators, policy makers and graduate students. The quality of the submissions assembled in this tome resembles the finest in academic peer review resources related to learning and teaching with imprisoned writers across North and South America.

Experiences matter. Any one of these 16 contributors writing about the work of prison teaching requires experience and a first-person voice that incorporates the myriad theories that effectively inform instructors themselves.

Students matter. Prison teachers are often pressured to render institutions more efficient in preventing future crimes, even though the current epidemic of mass incarceration in the American prison system is the genesis for this digest. With 16 wide-ranging chapters, this volume will be useful for experienced prison instructors, for educators preparing syllabi for teaching in prisons and for those seeking a guide to start new community endeavours.

This 272-page work is divided into three parts: free writing and unfree writers, jail and juvenile hall writing, and organized prison writing. The narratives within are neither simple recitations of individual classroom experiences, nor heroic accounts of any particular teacher. In practice, the bulk of these commentaries attempt to strike a balance between individual teaching experience and collective educational endeavours. The authors seem to share a belief that teaching imprisoned writers represents a form of intellectual self-development that is challenging yet rewarding as the editors convey the transformative potential of strengthening communities through relationship building.

In the introduction, editor Joe Lockard expresses how most prison literature often appears as a metaphor itself, rather than the product of the lived daily reality and works emanating from within carceral settings in the face of censorship established by prison authorities. Hence, expressive production from the carceral system is a cultural touchstone. To write within prison is to write from within an ever-expanding underclass, and to read prison literature is to read about ourselves and our potential selves. He proposes that through writing, the prisoner can make the same

transformation of consciousness available to all by rekindling the fight for social justice that was born of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s when jails and prisons were once honoured as collective sites of African American remonstrance.

Prison Pedagogies has a wide range of arguments and case studies focused on writing as a discipline because the sprawl of mass incarceration has led to prisons and jails becoming a major network of literary production, even if this wave of writing has remained largely invisible in the popular press. Efforts to produce intellectual freedom via transparent and participatory methodologies embrace an unmistakably working-class perspective as prospects for higher education in prisons are improving slightly despite the general regression seen under the Trump administration. Meanwhile, prison writing illuminates alienated voices seeking to establish independence.

An illustrative case study examined in this volume comes all the way from Argentina where a handcrafted book from a Federal Detention Centre in Buenos Aires named *Ondas de Hiroshima* highlights a compelling anthology of works that fortifies the shared value of inclusivity in terms of societal reintegration. This is made all that more apparent by the fact that former prisoner turned Doctor of Sociology, Waldemar Cubilla, literally hand stitched its printed pages in the bookbinding facilities of San Martin University. The cover is corrugated cardboard painted by hand, dripped in splatters of red, yellow and green paint, devoid of inscription except for hand stitches used to communicate a redacted title. The splashes are like bloodstains and the stitches are like scars hitherto the dilapidated look and feel is seemingly harmless to the eyes of the prison guards who see it enter or leave in the hands or bag of a teacher. The stitches symbolize healing and the reader should ask themselves what plots or scenes are sewn and unsewn inside. Furthermore, several black and white photos taken by 35mm matchbox pinhole cameras are disguised within. A web search reveals that *Prison Pedagogies* is a singular source of the English translation of these imaginative works.

In prison, even the title of student is highly valued, as writing becomes an opportunity for establishing new claims of agency, and for shaping allegiances of social capital and thereby constructing community. Teachers can declare these writers as powerful communicators when writing manages to escape confinement and goes beyond the frames that usually define and contain the way a prison is regarded. Since incarceration is commonly understood as an exercise in social purification, writing is the

continuation of existential relevance acting on this conditioned ideology even as prisoners face severe disadvantages in society – writing dismisses and resists social exile. Writing effectively redefines an imposed sentence through the various forms of expressive production made available in the carceral system, which can be reframed by books like this that allow for materials to be published and reach broader audiences.

Throughout several of the chapters in this volume, other strategies of empowerment are discussed which can help break down prejudices within the student body, as well as between students and the world. Teachers can ask what context will inspire and guide students? What role can textual selection play in fostering compassion, love and forgiveness? How can textual selection change toxic behaviour? How can assignments embolden contemplative practices of non-violence? Instructors can benefit from the diverse spectrum of practical experiences they encounter in *Prison Pedagogies*. Writing and sharing between themselves can even become a means of comprehending and overcoming psychological and social traumas in their personal lives.

The editors argue that the economic integration of mass incarceration into working-class life is evident in the demographic shift in the prison population. This indicator serves as a baseline truth that can build an interlocking bridge between working-class and prison class-consciousness. Among faculty and graduate students, there is debate concerning how the ability to simply walk in and out of a prison before and after manifests class privilege. Educators must also acknowledge how establishing questions of class and race function before they enter a prison classroom. Under those terms, critical inquiry can serve not just as an instrument for intellectual growth, but also as a vehicle for an improved society.

Prison Pedagogies provides categorical proof that prison need not always a place of failed transformation. Many of the writing programs detailed in this book are built up from a fresh point of view that looks clearly at prisons and their contradictions. Thankfully, educational workers who enable similar forms of collective production through the circulation of knowledge, materials, and educational resources preserve the essence of free expression and challenge the normative aspects of punishment and prisons. This can additionally strengthen positive claims of citizenship, along with processes of organization aimed at defending human rights and expanding the sphere of social inclusion for criminalized people. Ultimately, this manuscript is an

exceptional and flourishing example of how prison teachers constitute an overture for their students' pedagogical participation in open society despite exclusion and subordination.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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