

Development through Different Forms of Pedagogy

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For over two million prisoners across the United States, access to educational opportunities enable them to develop the skills needed for effective reintegration into society and employment. As a student at five colleges, three of which have been in a carceral setting, I have experienced a variety of methods of instruction including correspondence courses, procedural classroom learning and more holistic classroom education. Each of these experiences has given me insight into the unique challenges of trying to attain higher education in prison and the efficacy of various pedagogical methods. While I did find some methods more effective than others, the one commonality that all instructions shared was the ability to expand my understanding of the world and of others. Once I was released, these skills were key in my ability to obtain a good job at Caterpillar, communicate with my co-workers and eventually obtain promotions. According to a 2013 RAND Corporation study, “inmates who participated in correctional education programs had 43% lower odds of recidivating than inmates who did not” (Davis et al., 2013, p. 57). Looking back, there were aspects of each curriculum that hindered their effectiveness. Overall, however, I have found that being offered higher education while incarcerated enriched every aspect of my life.

My first experience with higher education began in the Missouri Department of Corrections in 2003. At the time, the GED was the only education offered. My only option for higher education was to find a school that offered correspondence courses and pay for them myself. I decided on the University of Arkansas, but due to lack of access to Pell Grants or any other financial assistance, I was only able to take one course at a time. Initially, this worked well because although I was excited about the opportunity, I was a little unsure of my abilities. The correspondence method of instruction had many weaknesses, but it also had its strengths. The drawbacks included the lack of interaction with the instructor and not getting answers to my questions while working on the material. The only instruction I received came in the form of red inked corrections or notes written in the margins of returned assignments. This, however, forced me to problem solve on my own. I would often check out supplemental texts from the prison library to familiarize myself with concepts I was struggling with. I believe this led to a firmer grasp of the material once I had my “Aha” moment. Another positive aspect of this method was the fact that

it forced me to read the text thoroughly. I came to this realization after my release and the experience of classes in a traditional classroom setting where I would, at times, neglect the readings and would instead rely on the lectures and my notes. With correspondence classes, the reading was all I had so I not only read it, but often reread it more than once. This was a very effective form of learning for me.

Once I was released in 2010, I was approved for Pell Grants through the FAFSA program. The online application was a little problematic, but once completed, the information was immediately transferred to the schools, and all I had to do was walk in and register. I was able to attend community college at no cost to myself and was even given a stipend each semester to help with the everyday cost of living. This kind of help would have been beneficial while I was incarcerated. It would also be beneficial for the countless number of men and women who want to take classes, but cannot afford it.

The comparison between correspondence courses and classes on an actual campus was like night and day. I now had access to my instructors, peer interaction and resource rooms. I had become accustomed to doing things on my own, but quickly made use of all the available assistance. I attended Illinois Central College for two years then transferred to Midstate College to pursue my Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration. Unfortunately, before I was able to complete the program, I returned to the prison system.

I arrived here at Danville Correctional Center in June 2014. I was shocked and excited to hear of all the available education opportunities offered and quickly enrolled. This would be my first experience with higher education in a classroom setting inside a correctional facility. The experience was twofold: the first part was my experience with Danville Area Community College (DACC) and the second part was my experience with the Education Justice Project (EJP) offered by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. There was a stark contrast between the two experiences, but overall I would say both helped my learning in a number of ways. The DACC program offered courses in a liberal arts program and the opportunity to achieve an Associate's Degree in Arts and Sciences. The method of instruction was what I would call procedural or in the words of Freire (2003, p. 72) the "banking method". Instructors mostly taught by lecturing and students were seldom asked to use critical thinking. This method of pedagogy denies the

emotional presence and wholeness of students, and focuses on facts and data, often with no regard for listening to and hearing from students. It made the classroom a setting where optimal learning cannot and will not occur. I was often left with the feeling that instructors lowered their expectations because they were in a carceral setting, and I wondered if they had preconceived notions about the abilities of incarcerated men and women. I knew that they were handcuffed by budgetary and security constraints, which only made things worse. The texts were often outdated and some were even missing whole chapters, while instructors had no real connection with the students. I interviewed a former DACC instructor who was initially told by prison officials to “keep students at arms length”, because “they always have an ulterior motive”. I cannot think of anything more disruptive to fostering a healthy learning environment. Open lines of communication between students and teachers have an enormous impact on what is learned and how well it is understood.

In the spring of 2015, I was accepted into the Education Justice Project and began taking three and four hundred level courses from the University of Illinois. Shortly thereafter, I was offered a unique opportunity to return to the DACC program as a student teacher in an Applied Mathematics course. The experience gave me a new perspective on the many challenges that instructors face in a carceral setting. Not only was I able to better understand the student-teacher relationship, but it gave me the ability to implement different methods of instruction and see the effects first hand. The opportunity could not have come at a better time because I am currently taking CI499: Teaching and learning Numeracy from the University of Illinois. The course focuses on teaching through problem solving as opposed to the “teach by telling” or the banking method that is most common today. In CI499, the instructor Dr. Lubienski showed us the think-write-pair-share technique that requires students to work through a problem then pair up with fellow students and discuss the concepts used. The very next day I was able to implement the technique with my students in the DACC class. As I sat back and watched the students explain to each other the different ways they solved the problem, it was as if I could see lights turning on in every head. Even students who usually showed a lack of interest became engaged in meaningful discussion about mathematics. The atmosphere was so much different than it was when I would teach from the text.

As I said before, opening lines of communication between teacher and student, as well as between students themselves is, in my experience, the most effective learning environment. Being that I am in the same situation as the men I teach, there is an inherent trust and bond shared, which makes teaching that much easier. I can only imagine how hard it is to enter this position as an outside teacher and try to gain that same respect. The instructors in the Education Justice Program have come up with what I have seen as an extremely effective way to overcome this challenge. Through the implementation of additional workshops and resources, they have opened lines of communication not only between instructors and students, but amongst the students themselves. Twice a week students are given access to resource rooms where they can have instructor consultation or just work with others. My brief experience with the EJP program has been the most enjoyable and eye-opening I have had with higher education up to this point. The method of instruction used is more metacognitive and is focused on challenging the students to engage the material, instead of the usual lecture-based format where the teacher stands in front and the students learn passively. EJP uses a discussion group setting where students and teachers sit in a circle and freely discuss topics. I found this method to be highly effective in engaging the more reticent students and in encouraging free-thinking. In an interview with a fellow EJP student, I was told that “hearing other students share their perspectives, which is often different from my own but equally valid, helps me to understand things more clearly”. EJP has found a way to create an interactive and thoughtful environment in the classroom that highlights human diversity. This, combined with the many programs offered outside the classroom such as English as a second language, Family and Community Engagement, Mindfulness, and the opportunities to contribute to symposiums on higher education, are in a class of their own.

Higher education for me has been a key that has unlocked many doors. From the experiences I have discussed, I learned that simply providing that opportunity, as well as the resources a program has to offer, greatly affects the program’s effectiveness. We cannot allow the efforts to educate prisoners to stagnate. By advocating the implementation of not just college in prison programs, but good programs such as EJP, we can change the lives of many, and reshape the way society sees the incarcerated men and women.

REFERENCES

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Christopher Shea is a University of Illinois student currently incarcerated at The Danville Correctional Center. He has an Associate Degree in Arts and Science, and received the Artoru Martinez Research Award for his research on higher education on prison. His current project is the study of the effectiveness of different forms of pedagogy, especially those used in carceral settings. By giving people a look at his experiences inside, he hopes to inspire a progressive view of prison education. Mr. Shea can be contacted at:

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