

Spring 2008

Slipping Pages through Razor Wire: Literacy Action Projects in Jail

Tobi Jacobi

Colorado State University, tobi.jacobi@colostate.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/communityliteracy>

Recommended Citation

Jacobi, Tobi. "Slipping Pages through Razor Wire: Literacy Action Projects in Jail." *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2008, pp. 67–86, doi:10.25148/clj.2.2.009492.

This work is brought to you for free and open access by FIU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Community Literacy Journal* by an authorized administrator of FIU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact dcc@fiu.edu.

Slipping Pages through Razor Wire: Literacy Action Projects in Jail

Tobi Jacobi

This essay explores the intersection between writing studies and civic engagement through the action projects developed in E465: Prison Literature and Writing. Such literacy activism creates immediate opportunities for advanced undergraduates to more fully understand the work of literacy in contested spaces like jail and extends a call to action for writing teachers to acknowledge the possibility of community-based writing collaborations.

Razor wire. To many, razor wire represents security, safety, a boundary between the good and free and the deviant and dangerous. For writers and teachers who work within U.S. prisons and jails, razor wire symbolizes a series of challenges to the composing process. A sharpness that cuts the student teacher relationship in often unfamiliar ways. A slicing of drafts that cuts certain topics, phrases, and confidentialities away without writers' consent. Historical and contemporary prison writing memoirs invoke an image of the solitary writer slipping pages through razor wire, and for some, this was and is reality. Yet, the jail where I facilitate writing programs isn't surrounded by the razor wire that is characteristic of so many institutions; this is not because it is a facility governed by progressive or alternative sentencing philosophies, but rather because the inmates simply never get out. Their "yards" are small walled and paved areas located deep within the building complex. And still razor wire has a significant cultural meaning that pervades even institutions without its physical presence.

To slip through the razor wire is to challenge the system. To slip through the razor wire is risky, whether you are trying to slip contraband in—or make it visible to the rest of the world. And to slip through, under, or around razor wire with language—written or verbal—I suggest, is the work of social justice and a growing number of scholars in composition and rhetoric who are motivated by such issues and the possibility of change. To complicate the possibility of change, this essay explores the intersection between writing studies and civic engagement through the action projects developed in a capstone English course focused on prison literature and writing. Such literacy activism creates immediate opportunities for advanced undergraduates to

more fully understand the work of literacy in contested spaces like jails and extends a call to action for writing teachers to acknowledge the possibility of such writing collaborations.

Configuring Change in Community-Based Literacy Classrooms and Jail

“[I]t is when we open our classrooms to communication of all sorts not just to E.B. White (though he wrote beautifully) or to academic cultural critique (though much of it is timely and of great interest) and, especially, not just to Time, Newsweek, and US News and World Report—that we begin to understand the role communication plays in the lives of active participants in this democracy” (George 15-16).

As Diana George and many community literacy scholars suggest, movement toward a more ethical and just world requires engagement beyond the traditional and canonical classroom.

To understand our world more fully than E.B. White’s prose or handbook make possible requires critical attention to other contexts, processes, and relationships based in literate practice. Many recognize the need to locate and engage literacy beyond the conventional boundaries of school (Barton and Hamilton; Gere; Heath; Higgins, Long, and Flower, Hull and Schultz). As Jeff Grabill argues, “If theorizing about literacy does not account for institutional systems in locating literacy, the possibilities for changes to the meaning and value of literacy are constrained. And this is the real problem” (44). Service learning and community-based research has often been correlated with social change (Cushman “Rhetorician”; Cushman “Public Intellectual”; Herzberg; Peck, Flower, and Higgins), and models for achieving change through reciprocity have been offered through curricula, assessments, and turns toward outside models for configuring community-university partnerships (Cushman “Sustainable”; Goldblatt; Mathieu; Carrick, Himley, and Jacobi).

In many service learning courses, however, change (for students) is projected as altered/expanded/exploded perception about a social issue, constituency group, or other aspect of their community experience. This itself does not constitute change in the minds of many community partners and activists. While the work accomplished may be good, useful, needed labor, change is more complex, and, as Gorzelsky, Goldblatt, and Mathieu suggest, there is a need to consider alternative models and purposes for engaging in community literacy work. In *The Language of Experience* Gwen Gorzelsky characterizes this initial labor as contact, suggesting that “when language practices support individual and communal change, they do so by expanding people’s contact with unaware dimensions of their experience. This contact results from changed conditions of experience and in turn promotes change” (211).

Gorzelsky goes on to argue that such contact precedes the successful negotiation of difference and coalition-building and that learning experiences can be crafted to offer increased access to language experiences that will

result in increased knowledge-making and negotiation in specific contexts (215-24). Eli Goldblatt argues that academics and teachers can engage more fully in community-based work by rethinking how and when contact occurs. He invokes Saul Alinsky's model of community organizing as a method of reconsidering how community relationships can be forged and maintained beyond a semester-long course and situates collective social change through the contributions scholars and service learning practitioners can make as knowledge activists (defined as experience, resources offered "responsibly and cooperatively" through a non-interventionalist approach [292-293]). Such models of contact complicate the notion of *change-as-understanding* by requiring commitments that extend beyond the labor most service learning courses (and students) can offer. They complicate, but I don't believe they eliminate the possibility of engaging in meaningful work within the courses we teach.

How and to what end contact is negotiated and achieved is often framed in terms of a problem-solving model of community literacy or service learning. In *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*, Paula Mathieu argues that the difference between problem- and project-based approaches to community engagement is significant, that the project approach has the potential to avoid the "negative space" of the problem-solving approach that depends upon a solution

(50). As Mathieu suggests, "a project orientation privileges creation and design" and responses to problems without being defined by an external measure (50). This is particularly notable when community partnerships are forged within the correctional

**To understand our world more fully than
 E.B. White's prose or handbook make
 possible requires critical attention
 to other contexts, processes, and
 relationships based in literate practice.**

system. Community partners are often dually defined as the jail administrators and staff and the incarcerated learners and writers students work with. Both constituencies are driven by and impacted by external measures: the legal system, public assumptions and pressures, conflicted relationships with conventional social systems like school and more. Incarcerated participants are particularly vulnerable when "problems" are linked to their sense of self, a common rehabilitative measure that inspires feelings of shame, embarrassment, and "years of school failure, as well as an association of writing with constant corrections" (Boudin 143).

The use of a problem-based model also perpetuates the objectification that many inmates experience as institutions seek to prescribe generalist models for individual rehabilitation. A ready example exists in the only required educational access many prisoners have: GED training. As Jeff Grabill and others have suggested, the GED curriculum does little to advance learners toward critical thinking and engagement.¹ On the other hand, carceral settings have a tremendous need for projects that privilege and promote "creation and

design” as a way of making space for reciprocities based in shared learning and diverse outcomes.

Literature on literacy work in carceral settings illustrates this tension and the complexity of negotiating change. Service learning experiences can afford students the opportunities to interact as mentors, but often such work is complicated by the challenge of context. Criminal justice students at the University of West Florida mentored juveniles in adult jail and were confronted with the limitations of time, citing too much for one course, and too little to affect change (Swanson, King, and Wolbert 265). Lori Pompa’s Philadelphia-based Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program moves “outside” students into prison as they join “inside” students for an engaging but similarly time bound Freirean reading of the justice world (26). Lisa Mastrangelo recounts the enthusiastic engagement of her first year composition students in a course focused on writing and women in prison. Unable to directly interact with women inside, students conducted research for an advocacy group interested in moving toward work with incarcerated women and sponsored a book drive for the Women’s Book Project.

Though successful in these endeavors, both Mastrangelo and her students wonder about the possibility of reciprocity when constituency groups cannot come into contact (48), a concern echoed by students in my course. Tom Kerr’s capstone writing seminar confronted this issue head on through a correspondence exchange with women in U.S prisons that lead to serious questions of power, ideology, and culturally-driven assumptions about our legal system. Ultimately, it was the women’s responses to their queries rather than—or in addition to—the carefully scaffolded course texts that challenged students notions about the rights and value of prisoners. One correspondent wrote: “I was a bit insulted and a lot of prisoners would be by questions that question my humanness” (69). Another addressed the issue of change: “You ask how you can help. One way you can help is to foster more dialogue between prisoners and society. You’re a writer. The world changes through writing. You can help me by suggesting ways that I can more effectively communicate with America” (73). Direct correspondence such as this encourages students (including my own) to recognize and confront what it means to write inside—and the need for collaboration across razor wire. Each of the programs cited above presents a useful model for university-prison literacy projects that embody Freirean principles of problem-posing inquiry. Each demonstrates engaged dialogue on writing, justice, and life experiences by valuing incarcerated writers’ voices and challenging university students to move beyond the analysis of a potentially static text.

Just as prisoners and students champion literate action as a powerful agent of change, so do many of the teachers working in (and in opposition to) the correctional system. Ann Folwell Stanford, workshop facilitator at Chicago’s Cook County Jail and various correctional institutions throughout Illinois, argues that participation in a writing workshop is itself a radical move toward change. With participation comes the recognition of shared experience and the potential for a solidarity defined in opposition to institutional rehabilitative

philosophies (291). Longtime prison teacher Irene Baird suggests that situating key writers (e.g. Angelou, Giovanni, Gaines) in the role of author mentor can inspire incarcerated learners to imagine themselves in the role of activist (6). Such rhetorics are well-entrenched in prison activist writing. In her 2003 *Are Prisons Obsolete?*, Angela Davis outlines a continuum of alternatives to vengeful incarceration (105-115), possibilities that translate fears of lost reciprocity and institutional complicity into meaningful workshops based upon collective goals and classrooms engaged in dialogues about incarceration—and a world beyond the prison industrial complex. Programs like these inspire dynamic and thoughtful designs for prison-university collaborations by recognizing the inevitable complicities that accompany cross-institutional work while remaining committed to the possibility of change.

Along with many community literacy scholars and practitioners I recognize that change can be difficult to imagine and harder to sustain, that the material realities of post-incarceration—and even college—life make a writing workshop or capstone course seem rather insignificant. Yet, I also recognize these sites as spaces for collective and meaningful learning that can lead to social critique and public education. I offer the course description and literacy action projects, in many ways modeled on the programs cited above, that follow as examples of community-based writing collaborations that work toward negotiating these challenges and move toward new social realities.

The Course: E465: Prison Literature and Writing

“This has been one of the best and most important classes I have taken at CSU. I hope you will be able to teach this class again.” —Course Evaluation

This capstone course worked to extend advanced undergraduate students’ understandings of writing and genre through the examination of a range of prison literature and media. As cultural and rhetorical critics, students were trained to work in ways that will sound familiar to many readers—to study and critique issues of power, agency, and possibility in both canonical texts, Malcolm X’s “Learning to Read,” for example, and less conventional and undercirculated texts, such as those by nearly invisible groups of women writers. Our primary aim as a group of inquirers was to examine the production, consumption, and reception of communication practices demonstrated by writers located in prison globally and locally, and, not surprisingly, this was outside the experience of most of the students in the class.

Through exploration of canonical and undercirculated texts and media representations—film, photography, radio, online media—the following goals were pursued:

- To understand debates surrounding the nature of writing as well as the role of writing/language as cultural and social capital for incarcerated writers

- To consider the relationship between writing and the human experience by examining the will to compose by writers confined to small and/or highly structured spaces
- To consider the issues of identity and ethics that influence the composing processes of the 21st century prison writer
- To apply course content and debate to lived experience through active engagement with the local justice system: a prison book drive, writing workshops, etc.
- Further the course aimed to complicate and extend disciplinary knowledge through connections between literature and the material world by considering how a diverse set of incarcerated writers approach writing as a meaning-making process
- Reading texts across gender, ethnicity, race, and time
- Tracing the circulation of those writings.

A primary goal, then, was to consider the role of language and literacy in constructing identities within discourse communities beyond the academy, recognizing, as Eli Goldblatt suggests, that students and faculty function “inside an institutional framework for literacy that is merely one among many” (293).

Course texts included historical and contemporary prison writings representing genres such as essays, poetry, drama, fiction, nonfiction, memoir, and documentary journalism, film, radio, and web materials. Course assignments included close readings of seven books and multiple critical essays, weekly online forum discussions, two reading response essays, a collaborative prison action project, and a final exam.² The collaborative action project component functioned to extend students experience with incarceration and literacy practices by engaging them beyond the conventional boundaries of the classroom. Students developed and chose to participate in one of five community projects.

Choices impacted our local detention center and included the organization of an adult and children’s book drive for their library, on-site GED tutoring, co-facilitation of an ongoing women’s writing workshop called SpeakOut!, a Writing Mentor Program distance exchange between prison and university writers, and work identifying and bringing a prison writer to campus. These service learning projects were designed to help students see the complexities of accessing and achieving dominant literacy education and of producing and circulating prison writings. Students collected over 700 books, mentored eighteen writers, led writing workshops, taught GED learners, and raised over \$8500 to bring renowned Latino poet, Jimmy Santiago Baca to campus for a series of readings in classrooms and at the jail.

I’m going to highlight two of those action projects here as worthy of further consideration as literacy and writing scholars reconfigure and refine our understanding of what change, particularly social change, means and how it can be enacted. I also highlight them as models for projects that enact Goldblatt’s call for more attention to the negotiation of university-community

partnerships that precede and outlive individual students and semesters. The two projects are the Writing Mentor Program and the Speak Out! Women's Writing Workshop.

Action Project #1: The Writing Mentor Program as Student Engagement

“My favorite part of the class was the action projects. Doing the GED tutoring...has opened my eyes to many issues I've never thought about.” —Student Evaluation

The Writing Mentor Program paired fourteen university students with eighteen incarcerated writers at three adult and juvenile detention sites.³ This program was inspired by and modeled after the national PEN American Center's prison writing mentorship program. Since that program required a commitment beyond one semester and wasn't open to undergraduate mentors, we developed a local program to foster working writing relationships between incarcerated writers and university mentors. The program's philosophy and goals emerged from a blend of pedagogical and social justice motives. These include the promotion of written literacy as a powerful form of self-expression, engagement in direct literacy training and advocacy, increased public awareness on issues of incarceration, and the increased and broadened circulation of writings by incarcerated writers.

Practically, students exchanged writing with an incarcerated teen or adult writer through an exchange of folders. Students were encouraged to develop the relationship by focusing on their shared interest in writing. In-class training included discussions on response style, available and appropriate pedagogical tools, and the ethics of publication as well as the importance of establishing clear boundaries (e.g. using our university address, exchanging first names only, sharing limited personal data). One issue that received much attention in the development of this program was the use of the labels “mentor” and “mentee.” Even as I reflect, they seem imperfect terms, laden with implied power relations and conventional school strategies, an almost direct departure from the critical pedagogy that the program aimed to enact. Yet because inequity and power disparities were ever-present, “partners” wasn't an accurate descriptor. As Grabill has indicated, adult learners invest their time carefully and feel a sense of satisfaction when their concept of education has been fulfilled (43). Inmates needed the idea of a university “mentor” as motivation to join the program; similarly, when the program extended beyond the semester, university students were recruited with the promise of mentoring a prison writer. Our aim was to design the exchanges in ways that could allow the pair to become “partners”—through exchanged rather than only submitted/received writings, reciprocal talk about writing, etc.—if and when it felt right for both writers.⁴

Student mentors added their individual reflections to a collective blog site as a way of sharing individual experiences with “prison” writers as well as modeling and advising each other on effective—and floundering!—techniques for engaging with unseen writing partners. One mentor writes:

My first response was kind of challenging. I am realizing that it is difficult to respond to writing without knowing what the writer is expecting/wanting you to look at. Plus, I had to respond to poetry—my first time ever! It was hard! I need some advice from some of you creative writers on effective ways of responding to poetry. I also hope that all of my comments were encouraging and not too harsh. Sometimes I feel like I get into teacher mode, which is what *I do not* want to do with these writers. Mostly, I am hoping to function as a person that my woman feels comfortable having correspondence with, and to encourage open writing. Improvement is obviously important, but more important for me is to keep the writer writing!

Issues of representation regularly surfaced for mentors. This student confronts her mentor identity in the opening lines, grappling with issues of audience, genre, and her own inexperience with poetry response. She also struggles with “teacher mode” and worries that her written notations will provoke associations with traditional schooling in ways that she is trying to avoid. Students regularly faced the question Flower so aptly articulates: “how do you support someone else’s ideas and development when you are the one with all the technical knowledge and writing experience?” (251). Jail complicates this challenge further since the mentors didn’t have access to their partners’ educational or writing histories unless they were explicitly revealed.

Other mentors felt overwhelmed by the lack of context their writing exchanges made visible. This mentor expresses a clear desire for the “talk” that often accompanies peer review workshops or writing center tutorials:

The biggest challenge I have seen confronted with as a mentor is that there is so little communication from the mentees along the lines of what they want to work on (at least I have not heard anything from mine). Mostly I just receive the piece and that is it, so sometimes I feel like I am repeating myself...trying to establish some kind of writing relationship. Often this seems very one sided, and I’m hoping to get more feedback from them for which to work on. It would be very helpful to have something to focus on, rather than just having the work to look at and mull over.

Although a feedback exchange form was offered with each exchange, the jail writers rarely completed them; more often writers submitted only writing, sometimes without even the folder. As this student muses, this became an ongoing frustration for mentors who were uncertain about how to frame responses and how to support the writers without threatening the growing relationship.

Other mentors pointed to the physical challenge of reading and responding to writing composed across time and with few material resources:

I finally got a second piece of writing, though it is not from my first mentee, who, it appears, isn't going to be sending me any more stuff. This second piece is actually quite a challenge. Parts of it were written over a year ago and some just over a month ago. It looks like he just used any pieces of paper he could find and didn't just use them as a personal journal, but also for drawing. Visually it is hard to read, because the handwriting is small (trying to get the most out the space available) and sometimes a bit jumbled because of graphics that were on the page or that he drew.

Taken for granted on a college campus, paper can be a scarce resource in correctional settings. Here the materiality of jail collides with the mentor's expectations as the submission jumbles the notion of sequential drafting and organization with the necessity of using available space for multiple purposes. Another writer squeezed a lengthy microscopic narrative between the lines of a legal form, forcing the mentor to engage with an institutional document in a new way.

The missionary impulse is one the WMP actively worked to dismantle, though the desire for improvement and partnership was present for many mentors. One mentor writes:

The second round of writings I received were better than the first, but the person I'm working with is still trying to write about too much in a single piece. In the first round of writings, I encouraged the person I'm working with to focus on one of the phrases she used in a poem to create a new, more focused poem. The result was awesome, so I encouraged her to do a bit more tweaking, and to consider the piece for publication. As far as the other two pieces I received this time, I suggested she take a single theme and focus her writing on that theme. Things are going well. My mentee and I have been corresponding through letters with every exchange, and I've even given her some of my own writing.

There are two observations worth noting in this excerpt. First, the progress narrative revealed in the opening lines of this blog entry represent the

experience many students in mentor/tutorial roles assume: education and practice will result in improvement. Yet, as Flower notes, mentors may feel jarred when “they encounter the conflicts between community literacy and their own practices, standards, and assumptions about writing” (251). This mentor celebrates the shift she sees in her mentee’s work from the first submission to

In addition to refining writing skills, the workshops invited participants to foster space for creativity, evaluate past actions, envision life change, and promote community action and social change through writing and verbal story telling.

the second. The implication is that if the mentee follows the advice that will follow for “tweaking,” it will be ready for publication, an end product that indicates success for many writers. Second, the final line of the entry demonstrates a shift in the relationship through movement from a traditional mentor-mentee interaction

to a relationship based in shared writing: correspondence and written work. It is also notable that the conditions of writing are not the focus of the mentor’s reflection. This suggests either a conscious effort to understand this partner as a writer and base the relationship in literate activity—or it makes visible the ways that a distance writing exchange can mask the material realities of writing in prison.

The blog entries excerpted above are representative of the reflections shared by the students serving as mentors in the program, and while access to the written responses of the incarcerated mentees is confidential, I did observe the folders being received with great enthusiasm and being quickly returned to mentors with new writing and correspondence. The program is not without flaws, but as an action project intended to bring life to the conditions and challenges of accessing and engaging in literate activity in jail, it succeeded—and took up Mathieu’s call for project-based community engagement that rethinks reciprocity. It engaged university students in an effort to challenge canonical constructions of the prison writing genre and took on the dual issues of low literacy levels among adult incarcerated populations and the invisibility of “low profile” inmate accounts of life in prison and beyond. A project such as this further takes up Mathieu’s theorization of De Certeau to situate public writing as tactical, as capable of accomplishing context-driven, temporary, and often oppositional discourse as the writing mentors and mentees engaged in written exchanges.

Community literacy projects inevitably connect to the strength or weakness of community partnerships and (dis)satisfaction with the terms of engagement. As a teacher who works in university and jail settings, the Writing Mentor Program challenged me to rethink reciprocity. Reciprocity came to mean several things, as the blogs suggest. Students gained access to a new population of writers/students, a challenge to the often-insulated space of a university. They also gained access to a new audience for their

ideas, one that did not function within semester timelines and evaluative expectations. Reciprocity for mentees might be configured as access to a tutoring relationship or an exchange of ideas between writers, or as access to individuals who are not employed by the correctional facility or members of a religiously sponsored recovery program, or simply as access to dialogic space with another student of writing. Such configurations allow us to imagine a prison writing partnership that enacts David Coogan's recent representation of civic dialogue as "a construction site for community, a functioning place with no real façade or formal entrance" (106). Although the Writing Mentor Program cannot free participants from the limitations of a semester-based project, the program does invite an engagement founded on the practice and collaborative interrogation of literacy rather than a model based in academic abstraction and grade point averages.

Action Project #2: SpeakOut! Women's Writing Workshops as Sustainability

"When we have established these relationships, we may be able to help the community partners identify problems and transform these problems into issues to act upon, only later considering how students in courses fit in and what university resources could be helpful in addressing the issues"
(Goldblatt 283).

The SpeakOut! Women's Writing Workshops at the Larimer County Detention Center (LCDC) began in 2005 and so preceded the class (highlighted here as a common way to engage in writing-based relationships in jail). The sessions provided a relatively safe and encouraging space for participants to express themselves through their writing and through dialogue within the workshop. In addition to refining writing skills, the workshops invited participants to foster space for creativity, evaluate past actions, envision life change, and promote community action and social change through writing and verbal story telling. Facilitators design workshop curricula, attend weekly staff meetings, run weekly workshops, and respond to writing submissions. Workshops were cofacilitated by undergraduate and graduate students and a university professor at LCDC in Spring and Fall 2006 with over 90 women writers participating. Each workshop met for ninety minutes weekly and resulted in the publication of an issue of the *SpeakOut! Journal* and a "coffeehouse" reading at the jail for all female inmates to attend. In both Spring and Fall 2006, over 50% of all residents attended. The *SpeakOut! Journal* is published biannually and is circulated among writers, peers, and family, and within the community through a local bookstore.

As an action project for E465, this workshop impacted a relatively small number of students. Two to four students are handpicked annually to cofacilitate this project; it takes a mature student to work in a correctional setting without becoming overwhelmed or reproducing teaching and

language practices that perpetuate rather than challenge patriarchal power relations. The students who have the most successful experiences are those who are motivated by more than a course requirement, often students with backgrounds in women's studies, critical literacy, or progressive pedagogy.

One outcome of the workshop is the development of community and a shared ownership of the workshop, work that offers an alternative to most of the time women spend in jail. Our community-based workshop is cultivated in several ways. The curriculum is largely organic and responsive. Each 90-minute session allows for activities ranging from invention and composing based on prompts to shared writings to informal oral response and debate on topics of interest to the group. Each facilitator contributes one prompt to the evening's lesson plan and shares in the administrative duties (e.g. typing and responding to submitted writings, opening the workshop and recording attendance, modeling writing techniques). Participants are invited to engage in every aspect of the workshop as well.

After the first meeting, facilitators invite returning writers to help orient newcomers by explaining, "what we do in the workshop" to encourage joint ownership. Workshop time focuses on process pedagogy inspired activities and relies upon collaborative and feminist methods. Group feedback follows each piece, and the workshop closes with the distribution of an "ideas for writing" handout. This resource includes two predetermined prompts for the women to work with during the week and the group collectively agrees on two more that are named and recorded in the moment. Such activities work to create an investment in the shared writing and storytelling—and ultimately the writing process. One facilitator notes a shift in the writers, a group that felt uncomfortable with labels such as "author" and "writer" only a few weeks earlier:

The number of women who want to share increases with each session. I think this speaks to the sense of community we've created over the past few weeks.

While many have theorized "community," I raise it as a meaningful development here for several reasons. First, the student is naming the formation of community based in writing, and given the public perception of most prison writers composing in isolated cells, this seems significant to her learning and conception of how literacy can function in alternative spaces. Second, the formation of community is not purposefully cultivated in carceral settings. The institution aims to maintain control. Organizing is discouraged. Prisoners are often relocated without explanation. Since community is charged with implications not applicable in a "free" world, the workshop sometimes embodies what Anita Wilson calls "third space," the "space between inside and outside worlds where [prisoners] can 'occupy their minds'" (74). The workshop occupies a liminal space where, however temporary, *writer* becomes an identity the participants can claim. Finally, community serves as a useful way to configure the boundary crossing students (and faculty) do when engaging in action projects. David Coogan's metaphor of community as

a “temporary tethering... across the racial and class boundaries that divide us” (107-8) creates space for considering the particular opportunities a semester project can offer. He suggests that academics can open inquiries because we are not “present bound” and I suggest that students engaged in action projects can actively join that inquiry as they correlate their observations and experiences with the study of literate practices—here organized around prison—across time and space.

As with the Writing Mentor Program, the SpeakOut! workshop forces participants to confront the complexities and complicities of context. I would argue, along with Stanford, that the conditions of incarceration make writing and writing spaces risky. Prisoners are not guaranteed “safe space” for the content or storage of their words. Cells are regularly ransacked, and writings of all kinds are often confiscated as evidence, contraband, or garbage. A writers’ words (whether fictional or not) can be leveraged against her or her peers if deemed inflammatory, provocative, or violent. The SpeakOut! strategy has been to highlight such risks at the opening of each workshop series and to encourage writers to be intentional about the pieces they store, send out to friends and family, and/or publish in publicly circulating sources such as the *SpeakOut! Journal*.

The material realities of prison have implications for students as well. Facilitators were often frustrated by the shifting conditions of our work, as one student notes in her blog:

One week we can’t bring our pens in, but the next week we’re allowed to bring in cookies? And then a lockdown? Maybe it’s because I am new to the workshop, but I keep waiting to hit a “groove” where the workshop becomes more routine. However, with different circumstances each week, I don’t think it’s going to happen. I was pretty disappointed that we weren’t able to facilitate the workshop, but considering the environment that the workshop takes place in, it seems inevitable that there will be obstacles such as lockdowns.

As this excerpt demonstrates, running a workshop inside prisons and jails creates a specific set of complications for community literacy projects. By nature jail is an unstable environment. Workshop participants move in and out of the institution at a moment’s notice. Conditions range from easy access to the confiscation of facilitator tools to cancelled workshops—or suspended if a lockdown occurs during the workshop. The emotion economy in jail is unstable as well. Participants often have histories with each other that precede and influence workshop dynamics. Seemingly benign prompt choices elicit unexpected and sometimes painful associations: “Write about your favorite sound.” “Mommy”. Missed holidays and life events create heightened urgencies for affirmation when writers choose to share their narratives. While the workshop structure recognized and tries to support this risk-taking, there is always the possibility of provoking an emotional trajectory that cannot

be supported by a weekly workshop or ill-funded justice system. University, jail, and other institutional constraints layer additional tensions into project design and function as power relations are navigated and challenged; program materials always have a dual administration/writer audience, for example. Finally, the notion of social justice that emerges strongly for some students must be tempered in recognition of the complicity the program experiences through its institutional sponsorship. The introduction of potentially revolutionary writings and ideas, critical literacy practices, and methods for promoting alternatives to socially constructed identity narratives of incarcerated writers must be navigated with care.

The SpeakOut! action project relies not only on engagement through weekly workshop sessions but also upon the publication and circulation of incarcerated women's writings, and the workshop disseminates writing farther than the other course-based projects. The anthologies travel to friends and family, administrators, to local coffee shops and to other prison writing programs and scholars around the country. Both facilitators and participants become invested in issues of representation as the final product is negotiated. One student facilitator mused:

We had a few questions last night from new people about what the book will look like and we've been getting suggestions from the women about putting more pictures as well as page numbers in the book. [Co-facilitator] also suggested that as facilitators we should put in a few lines of our own reflections on our experiences in the workshop. I think we should let the women be as involved as possible in the creation of the book this time around. Maybe we could bring in sample covers and they could vote on which color or design they like best.

Though published in a basic and affordable form, the SpeakOut! journal works to revise public perceptions of the writers' identities through what Brenton Faber calls "identity-stories," narratives that are not without risk, but that "act as protective counterweights to a daily barrage of messages, constructions and images" (171). Such work will not create earthquakes of change in a powerful system based in retribution, but we might locate small ruptures through moments of literate action as the workshop writings are produced and circulated, as student facilitators design and revise the space of the workshop, and importantly, as they move beyond the workshop into the other parts of their lives with new understandings of what and where writing occurs (also see Carter; Stino and Palmer). As Diana George suggests:

[Community publications] do not exist in a vacuum. They reject the fragmentation many of us experience as or at least suspect is characteristic of life in the 21st century. Moreover, they actually do effect change, on the local level and beyond, in the lives of the people they work with and for (8).

Literacy Action and Social Change=Complexity and Possibility

“Learning to take literate action is learning to live in a complicated world where theory is tested and ideas such as literacy take on a negotiated meaning” (Flower 255).

Action projects like the SpeakOut! workshops and the Writing Mentor Program create what Powell and Takayoshi call “moments for reciprocity” by simultaneously engaging students in community-based action research and increasing inmates’ access to functional and creative literacy programs. Further, these community-centered writing projects work to challenge the canon of “prison writing” by extending our disciplinary commitment to valuing and publishing the voices of historically un/derrepresented voices to include the words and experiences of prisoners. And that possibility inevitably leads me back to the question I continue to ask of each community-based course and project I design: what kind of change can such projects enable, represent, and enact? How can this contact result in responsible literacy activism?

This essay opened with the invocation of the image of razor wire and the possibility of slipping through political and personal acts of oppositional discourse without injury; yet it is also useful to refocus our gaze upon the spaces between the

wire spirals instead of only noting sharp edges. The spaces between suggest room for the blending of sound waves and the transfer of sheets of paper marked by excitement, confusion, anger, questions, affirmation, and hope. In that world of possibility, this is how I imagine closing the story of this course and community partnership with the jail: university students participating in this course were deeply engaged in their action projects and moved on to brilliant careers armed with the tools to understand how to fight for what they believe in through literacy activism. Similarly, jail participants in our writing workshops, tutoring sessions, and mentoring partnerships gained experience interacting with university students and found ways to apply their new (or strengthened) literacy skills to the lives they imagined beyond jail. It isn’t that easy, of course. If it were, university and correctional contexts wouldn’t present such complex, interesting, frustrating, and rewarding work for composition and literacy specialists.

As I move between my role as university professor and community teacher, I find the issue of reciprocity central to the development of sustainability and, in turn, change. University-prison projects such as the Writing Mentor Program and the SpeakOut! Writing Workshop move toward sustainability

The introduction of potentially revolutionary writings and ideas, critical literacy practices, and methods for promoting alternatives to socially constructed identity narratives of incarcerated writers must be navigated with care.

by complicating factors such as economic and participant stability, cross-institutional collaboration, negotiated growth, and creative renewal:

Stability: Both the WMP and SpeakOut! projects challenge participants to rethink the concept of stability. Economic buoyancy depends largely on successful grant writing efforts, though in recent years we've been able to depend upon our community partners at the jail to provide significant support for the final celebrations we cohost. That said, stability goes far beyond economics in this context. Jails do not enable the participant stability of other settings (prison, for example); neither do semester-based course involvements work provide the programmatic or mentor stability that many incarcerated writers need and desire to build meaningful and sustained relationships. What they can do is suggest the literate act as a process and tool that might contribute to individual and social stability.

Collaboration: A growing number of schools, non-profits, faith-based groups and other community institutions have begun to develop strong and ongoing collaborations to meet the needs of women and men bound by the justice system (ranging from short-term counseling to program facilitation to post-prison services). Such collaboration across institutions indicates a growing recognition that the whole inmate must be acknowledged if former prisoners are to contribute meaningfully to a better world.⁵ When colleges and universities join these partnerships different kinds of expertise can be contributed and challenged. The resources of higher education can often result in renewed public awareness; in the case of the SpeakOut! workshops our online presence and free publications attracted the attention of two teacher/performance artists who became guest facilitators and who may borrow our model to begin workshops in neighboring communities.

Growth: As Goldblatt argues, relationships and growth must be negotiated by forwarding clear and sustained commitments to community partners' needs. Many mentors and mentees expressed interest in continuing to grow their writing partnerships. The program ultimately extended a full year beyond the course. To compensate for the missing support of a bi-weekly class, with both its talk and required readings, materials such as a program philosophy and mentor training manual were developed. In Fall 2006, we trained fifteen new and returning student mentors and connected them with local and national incarcerated writers. An alternative way to imagine growth is to recognize the skills gained by student participants. Several former SpeakOut! cofacilitators have gone on to develop and/or participate in jail or at-risk writing programs in Arizona, California, and elsewhere in Colorado.

Renewal: There is a reciprocity that can take the form of a renewed interest in writing-as-change, both as a mode of communication with the outside world and a creative/learning process. University students often experience a creative renewal when participating in community-based work.

Projects present opportunities for application and deepened understanding of theoretical training in a new context; similar opportunities are presented to our incarcerated partners as they experience a writing partnership, experiment with a process approach to composing, and explore multiple forms of writing to communication effectively.

How do these movements inch toward sustainability and social change? Writing teachers and literacy workers have a responsibility to consider the potential needs and contributions of incarcerated writers—and the implications of not doing so. Partnerships built across institutions like prisons bring us one step closer to realizing an engaged democratic citizenry. I'm not advocating the romantic reconstruction of narratives that have been sliced and reordering by razors; rather this is a call for writing and literacy specialists to participate in language education as a medium for change, a way to claim space, to displace a fixed method of learning, and to imagine the larger cultural implications of locking up over two million people's words.

Notes

¹ Yet one of our action projects did pair university students with GED students at the jail in pursuit of this culturally sanctioned (if not required) achievement. Their experiences raised questions of purpose, consistency in teaching and learning given jail life, and relevance. Some students developed a relationship with one GED student over the semester; others experienced a new partner each week—and the frustration of “getting nowhere.” See Paul Butler's on teaching the GED in a jail context for an interesting discussion of gender performativity and transgender locality in one tutorial relationship.

² A copy of the syllabus and course assignments can be found on the *Community Literacy Journal* website at communityliteracy.org/resources/authors/jacobi.

³ I would like to recognize the dedication of recent graduate student Aaron Leff for the development of the Writing Mentor Program. His interest—and ultimately thesis findings—made it possible for the program to move from a course action project to an independent community literacy program located in our Center for Community Literacy. Thanks to the CSU Student Leadership and Civic Engagement Office for their grant support in 2006-2007. Thanks also to the three *CLJ* reviewers who provided useful comments for revision.

⁴ Many literacy scholars have found Deborah Brandt's use of “sponsor” useful as a metaphor for describing the relationships learners have with teachers. There are several reasons why this is conflicted when applied to a carceral context. Most literally, the term “sponsor” invokes the model of mentorship advocated by Alcoholics Anonymous when used in prison. While this might seem irrelevant to a university teacher or researcher who can turn to other associations, the majority of programming inmates have access to are religiously affiliated and, well, sponsored. It is impossible to move outside this association within a correctional institution. Sponsorship also invokes a hierarchical relationship, one that traditionally invokes a expert/

novice or teacher/student model for interaction. The sponsor will provide aid (intellectual, financial, emotional) and the sponsored will gain access to expertise, to opportunities for advancement, for growth. This suggests a progress narrative that might work in some contexts, but prison is seldom one of them.

⁵ I also recognize the value of peer tutoring programs such as Shannon Carter's HOPE program and the program Kathy Boudin helped to found at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility.

Works Cited

- Baird, Irene. "The Evolution of Activists: Prison Women's Writing as Change Agent for their Communities." Paper presented at the Adult Education Research Conference. 2001. 25 Jan 2008 <http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/1b/03/ae.pdf>.
- Barton, David, Mary Hamilton, and Roz Ivanic. *Situated Literacies: Reading and Writing in Context*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Boudin, Kathy. "Critical Thinking in a Basic Literacy Program: A Problem-Solving Model in Corrections Education." *Journal of Correctional Education* 46.4 (December 1995): 141-145.
- Brandt, Deborah. *Literacy in American Lives*. New York: Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Butler, Paul. "The GED as Transgender Literacy: Performing in the Learning/Acquisition Borderland." *Reflections* 6.1 (2007): 27-39.
- Carrick, Tracy Hamler, Margaret Himley, and Tobi Jacobi. "Ruptura: Acknowledging the Lost Subjects of the Service Learning Story." *Language and Learning across the Disciplines* 4.3 (2000): 56-75.
- Carter, Shannon. "HOPE, 'Repair,' and the Complexities of Reciprocity: Inmates Tutoring Inmates in a Total Institution." *Community Literacy Journal* 2.2 (Spring 2008): 87-112.
- Coogan, David. "Community Literacy as Civic Dialogue." *Community Literacy Journal* 1.1 (2006): 95-108.
- Cushman, Ellen. "Rhetorician as Agent of Social Change." *College Composition and Communication* 47.1 (1996): 1-28.
- . "The Public Intellectual, Activist Research, and Service Learning." *College English* 61.3 (1999): 328-336.
- . "Sustainable Service Learning Programs." *College Composition and Communication* 54.1 (2002): 40-65.
- Davis, Angela. *Are Prisons Obsolete?* New York, NY: Seven Stories Press 2003.
- De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: U of California Press 1984.
- Faber, Brenton. *Community Action and Organizational Change: Image, Narrative, and Identity*. Carbondale: SIUP, 2002.

- Flower, Linda. "Literate Action." *Composition in the Twenty-First Century: Crisis and Change*. Ed. Lynn Z. Bloom, Donald A. Daiker, and Edward M. White. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1996. 249-60.
- Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Trans. Myra Bergman Ramos. New York: Seabury, 1968.
- George, Diana. "The Word on the Street: Public Discourse in a Culture of Disconnect." *Reflections* 2.2 (2002): 5-18.
- Gere, Anne Ruggles. "Kitchen Tables and Rented Rooms: The Extracurriculum of Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 45.1 (1994): 75-92.
- Goldblatt, Eli. "Alinsky's Reveille: A Community-Organizing Model for Neighborhood-Based Literacy Projects." *College English* 67.3 (January 2005): 274-295.
- Gorzelsky, Gwen. *The Language of Experience: Literate Practices and Social Change*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005.
- Grabill, Jeff. *Community Literacy Programs and the Politics of Change*. Albany: SUNY, 2001.
- Heath, Shirley Brice. *Ways with Words: Language, Life, and Work in Communities and Classrooms*. New York: Cambridge UP, 1983.
- Herzberg, Bruce. "Community Service and Critical Teaching." *College English* 45.3 (1994): 307-319.
- Higgins, Lorraine, Elenore Long, and Linda Flower. "Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry." *Community Literacy Journal* 1.1 (2006): 9-43.
- Hull, Glynda and Katherine Schultz. *School's Out: Bridging Out-of-School Literacies with Classroom Practice*. New York: Teachers College P, 2002.
- Kerr, Tom. "Between Ivy and Razor Wire: A Case of Correctional Correspondence." *Reflections* 4.1 (2004): 62-75.
- Longo, Bernadette. "Growing through Community: Opportunities for Ongoing Collaborations." *Writing to Make a Difference*. Eds. Chris Benson and Scott Christian. New York: Teachers College P, 2001: 23-36.
- Mastrangelo, Lisa. "First Year Composition and Women in Prison: Service-based Writing and Community Action." *Reflections* 4.1 (2004): 43-50.
- Mathieu, Paula. *Tactics of Hope: The Public Turn in English Composition*. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 2005.
- Peck, Wayne, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins. "Community Literacy." *College Composition and Communication* 46.2 (1995): 199-222.
- Pompa, Lori. "Disturbing Where We are Comfortable: Notes from Behind the Walls." *Reflections* 4.1 (2004): 24-34.
- Powell, Katrina M. and Pamela Takayoshi. "Accepting Roles Created for Us: The Ethics of Reciprocity." *CCC*. 54.3 (2003): 394-422.
- Stanford, Ann Folwell. "More Than Just Words" Women's Poetry and Resistance at Cook County Jail." *Feminist Studies* 30.2 (2004): 277-301.

- Stino, Zandra, and Barbara Palmer. "Motivating Women Offenders through Process-Based Writing in a Literacy Learning Circle." *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 43.3 (1999): 282-291.
- Swanson, Cheryl, Kate King, and Nicole Wolbert. "Mentoring Juveniles in Adult Jail: An Example of Service Learning." *Journal of Criminal Justice Education* 8.2 (1997): 263-271.
- Wilson, Anita. "Four Days and a Breakfast: Time, Space and Literacy/ies in the Prison Community." *Spatializing Literacy Research and Practice*. Eds. Kevin Leander and Margaret Sheehy. New York: Peter Lang, 2004.

Tobi Jacobi is an Assistant Professor of Composition and Rhetoric and the codirector of the Center for Community Literacy in the English Department at Colorado State University. Her research focuses on community literacies and the experiences of incarcerated writers and is informed by composition theory, critical literacy, and feminist studies.