theories and methodologies

Beyond Prison Education

JEAN TROUNSTINE

DURING MY TEN YEARS TEACHING COLLEGE CLASSES AND DIRECTING EIGHT PLAYS AT FRAMINGHAM WOMEN'S PRISON IN MASSACHUSETTS, I was always at odds with institutionally funded education programs behind bars. While I chose plays and ran discussions to expand thinking (*The Merchant of Venice*, *Lysistrata*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Simply Maria*, and *Waiting for Lefty*, to name a few) the unspoken aim of the education department was to reform the women—that is, to enlighten them on what society says is the "best" way to be, to teach socially accepted behavior as an antidote to crime.

Prison education, in direct opposition to enlightenment, often looks at the classroom as a place dedicated to "the high and holy purpose of forming a right character" (Neill 284). Certainly those in conflict with the law have always been seen as "correctable." Perhaps this is also because funding can lead to coercive expectations. While college education in prison is supported by the colleges themselves, by state grants or occasionally by the prisoners, high school and remedial prison programs are generally funded by the state. Thus, there are strings attached. Correctional institutions can therefore be problematic for the free thinker who wants to open rather than close doors.

Despite the rigidity of correctional institutions, creativity thrives behind bars. Prisoners enroll in programs, often as a respite, a challenge, a way out. The women I detail in *Shakespeare behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women's Prison* came for a writing class, walking warily that first night into program room 2, a lonely room painted gray-white with a window half filled with bars: "They seemed Desdemonas suffering because of jealous men, Lady Macbeths craving the power of their spouses, Portias disguised as men in order to get ahead, and Shylocks who, being betrayed, take the law into their own hands" (2). But they also seemed as ready as most to take up pens and paper.

Dolly, a maternal figure for some of the younger women, who called her "Ma," wrote poems to stay afloat, had been a hairdresser

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on the outside, and wanted to take college classes, at first, to get back at the state for taking away her freedom. Eventually, because she wanted to expand her horizons, she became the second woman in Massachusetts to graduate behind bars from a community college. Dolly's struggle to gain an education began with the fact that only three college classes were offered each semester. "I'm an English major by default," she once said to me.

Bertie, a beautiful, feisty Jamaican of nineteen, who I later discovered was in prison for killing her four-month-old child, huddled close to Dolly that first night. She fought off the many prisoners who condemned her for her crime but merely shrugged her shoulders at me when she learned that she was in English class—"It's either you or ESL." Early on, Bertie demanded little of education, because she was so busy dealing with her guilt. She slowly began to write about her past, focusing on growing up in rural Jamaica, where she loved her pet goat and took it to school for show-and-tell. She was not prepared for the night her mother decided to serve the goat to company for dinner. Out behind the house, Bertie found her beloved goat's head—in a pot. Writing eventually became a way for Bertie to deal with herself; the stage became a way for her to express her pain.

The trauma in the women's lives led me to literature. I encouraged them to find intersections with their experiences and the characters'. When I learned that women often received harsher sentences than men, we read Doris Lessing's "Woman on a Roof." When the women talked about being ignored by guards if they were ill, being kept in holding tanks at hospitals, and being waist-chained while waiting for exams, we read Zora Neale Hurston's "Sweat." As they complained about the relationships they'd had with abusive men, we considered Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. John Howard Griffen's *Black like Me* and June Jordan's "Nothin' Mean More to Me Than You and the Future Life of Willy Jordan" allowed us to touch on the issue of race. Dolly suggested we put on our first play, and when she found she could understand Shakespeare, she was in awe.

Five years into my work behind bars, I heard about a little-known alternative sentencing program that announced it could "change lives." Changing Lives through Literature (CLTL) was a program for probationers outside prison that had begun in the fall of 1991, and it is detailed in Robert P. Waxler's essay in this issue of *PMLA*. I wondered if a probation program such as CLTL might stimulate life change better than a prison program. By now, I saw that many ex-prisoners returned to prison, in part because people getting out often are without jobs and have unsettled relationships, questionable housing, and minimal support from their community. I knew how frustrating it was for the women to go back to their cramped cells—to continue in the same conditions despite the amazing work they did in the classroom and onstage. They were always confronted with literal restrictions, the grueling day-to-day of incarceration.

Corrections likes to talk about change only in terms of recidivism—how much, how often, and in what ways people return to crime. I had seen change appearing in small moments, change that had nothing to do with conformity: a woman wrote me after a play to say, "Thank you for giving me a chance to be someone else, if only for one night." Bertie's accent grew less noticeable after five plays, and her confidence grew stronger. Writing helped her, she said, to deal with her demons. Dolly wrote a letter in protest to the administration, complaining of conditions in her unit, and she was the first one to say, "If the men have theater programs, we deserve them too."

Robert Kane, then a district court judge, and Waxler were interested in the thinking behind the choices of those who are in conflict with the law. They wondered what might affect those choices. Their program idea was simple:

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use literature as a path to deep thinking about character. This corresponded to what I knew worked: literature could be a road to insight, and insight could pave the way to change.

This idea also expanded the work I'd done in prison by insisting that no voice could dominate the classroom, no idea would be considered more valid than another, and everyone had his or her own point of view. A group that consisted of students, the judge who sentenced them to the program, and one or more probation officers who handled their cases pushed the boundaries of institutional thinking. Literature discussion groups with offenders on the same playing field as judges and probation officers seemed unheard of in our criminal justice system. The belief that everyone's opinion about the story *mattered* and no one had the final say democratized the conversation.

In 1992 we initiated our first women's CLTL program. Quickly we realized we needed to join two court jurisdictions together to have enough women to enable powerful discussion, and so the Lynn-Lowell program began. By discussing books and the characters who inhabit them, the first group of women explored new aspects of themselves and increased their ability to communicate ideas and feelings to one another and to the judge, professor, and probation officers. They discovered that their opinions held weight. Participants reported that each person's experience led her to a different way of seeing the same text. Instead of seeing their world from only one angle, the women began opening up to new points of view.

Jack Mezirow talks about this kind of learning as the giving up of beliefs, attitudes, or emotional reactions and says it occurs when people "engage in critical reflection on their experiences, which in turn leads to a perspective transformation" (*Transformative Dimensions* 21). Mezirow says transformative learning involves the "conscious recognition of the difference between [the learner's] old viewpoint and the new one," which leads him or her to see that there is more value in the new perspective ("Perspective Transformation" 105).

As one female graduate of CLTL wrote, "The judge, probation officer, and teacher . . . were all there for us. . . . It was their belief in the program and us that helped me deal with a lot of shame. They respected me until I could learn to respect myself."

Many of the issues for women in our reading group were unlike those for men. Because forces in our society compel females to be nurturers, they blame themselves for scars on their families, for their own poverty, and most of all for crippling the lives of their children. They have to balance any probation program with family and job. They have difficulty not depending on men, who often mistreat them, proving to them that they aren't worth much. Mates of our female program participants have denigrated their participation instead of supporting it—some male mates have hidden participants' books or threatened them if they stayed in the program. In contrast, female mates of male program participants want to read their books, wait outside the room for their partners to finish class, and sometimes ask to participate. The women in CLTL are often afraid to fail and, instead of bolstering their ability to read, deny their abilities. Despite these women's insecurities, most telling is their engagement and honesty as they read, transforming the text through their own experience.

This became clearest to me in a CLTL class where we were reading Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. We were talking about Cholly, the father of Pecola, a young black girl. Pecola believes that if she gets blue eyes, she will gain access to a Shirley Temple world and all her pain and suffering will disappear. In a way, she does get blue eyes at the end of the book, after her father has sexually molested her and she has been teased mercilessly in school, gone to a town shaman, and lost her sanity. Morrison makes sure we know that such a "gift" does not ensure happiness.

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In our discussion, one of the women in our racially mixed group turned to the part of the novel she wanted to discuss, a particularly painful passage where Cholly rapes Pecola. She said, "Do you think Cholly really believes that is love?" At first there was stunned silence in the room as we thought about her question. The men—our dedicated judge, Joseph Dever (cofounder with me of the women's program), and one of the probation officers—said, "No!" and tended to want to push the question aside. But the women wanted to delve, to understand what was in Cholly's mind. They could not stop talking about how and why Cholly might think that he truly loved his daughter with his actions. As they pondered his background, his losses, and his social understandings as well as Pecola's, it was clear that several of them were alive to their own abuse experiences at the same time. Without talking about themselves, they were processing deeply on two levels, the level of the text and the level of self. Someone said that she understood that there was hope for all of us because there is hope for Claudia, the young narrator who tells the story.

This seeming duality—discussing the literature while recognizing one's own experiences—promotes thought and potential change. According to Paolo Freire, real transformation is a direct contradiction to filling people with facts and is certainly in opposition to any educational model that suggests one follow the leader. He writes, "The solution is not to 'integrate' [students] into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves.'"

Reading alone allows for reflection, for moral consideration, for empathy, and for insight. Discussion allows for a kind of distancing, a gained perspective. CLTL uproots the notion of teacher as knowing all and permits each participant to be a teacher of his or her own truths.

Institutions resist change, but despite that people have power. And the best antidote to crime is still, in my mind, the kind of power that comes from a considered, free-thinking education. Texts can touch us as gently as a slight breeze or, if we're given the chance, they can do more. They encourage us to push our boundaries, teach us we are not alone, and stimulate us to shake our bars as fiercely as a caged bird.

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