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Inside Voices: Collaborative Writing in a Prison Environment

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Inside Voices: Collaborative Writing in a Prison Environment

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This piece explores how collaborations in the writing classroom are challenged and altered when that classroom is located in a medium-security prison. This text (itself a collaboration between the instructors and ten of our incarcerated students) unpacks how communication is regulated by the institutional authority of the prison and explores how the innovations demanded by the prison's technological constraints can provide agency to people who are systematically disenfranchised. Through a combination of written text and audio podcasts, we focus on two different dimensions of that process: collaborations between students and teachers and collaborations between the students themselves.

Introduction

Imagine that you have been assigned a collaborative project, but being caught working on it could have serious consequences for you and your teammates. Other people have occasionally collaborated before, sure, but activities that no one seems to care about one day are often punished by loss of recreation time or even employment the next.

So imagine trying to complete your project only when you are sure no one is looking: in furtive conversations between sets at the gym, or through complicated and arcane paper-based delivery systems. Imagine that when one of your group members (selected for residential proximity, not shared interests) fails to follow through, that failure does not simply annoy and inconvenience you but incapacitates the project completely. If you need any resources at all for this project—an article for background research, say, or something as simple as a reference picture—imagine having to wait weeks to get them because you have to rely on an outsider to provide those materials for you.

What you are imagining is the everyday reality of education at the Danville Correctional Center. For both practical (curtailing gang activity) and ideological (punishing "felons") reasons, the prison is invested in ensuring that communication

follows only a very few carefully prescribed channels that are manufactured to isolate, silence, and contain. The processes and practices that comprise this system, which we collectively term the Carceral Communication Framework (CCF), structure life inside the prison-industrial complex at the Danville Correctional Center. In this article, we examine those effects through the lens of a semester-long multimodal writing course and the opportunities for subversion it unexpectedly revealed.

We contend that collaboration in a prison setting can function as what Anna Plemons calls "tactical intervention"—challenging the CCF and offering agency to people who are systematically disenfranchised. Examining the CCF alongside the innovations demanded by the prison's technological constraints, we focus on two different dimensions of that collaboration process: collaborations between students and teachers and collaborations among the students themselves. Specifically, we examine how collaboration functions subversively in group work involving incarcerated students and how it erodes the traditional roles of students and instructors.

Incarceration and Education

To say that the United States has hit a crisis point with mass incarceration would be a very serious understatement. The U.S. has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, a rate that legal scholar Michelle Alexander notes has gone from roughly 300,000 people to over 2 million people in the penal system in less than 30 years. One of the most striking features of what has come to be called the prison-industrial complex (PIC) is the disproportionate rates at which people of color are incarcerated—in some cities, notably, Washington D.C., 75% of young black men can expect to be incarcerated at some point in their lives (8-9).

Erica Meiners, an educational scholar and prison abolitionist, writes that although for middle-class white residents of Chicago, IL, "going downstate" generally refers to students heading south to the elite public institutions in the middle and southern part of the state. For the majority of her own students and other disenfranchised students, this phrase signifies something entirely different: being incarcerated in the state's prisons, often several hours from their home communities.

Year after year, funding for prisons increases as education budgets are slashed; in Illinois, the annual cost of incarcerating just one adult is nearly four and a half times what it would cost to educate one child in the K–12 schools (Meiners, "Building an Abolition Democracy").

In a system that exacerbates inequalities by funneling some residents into elite educational institutions and others into carceral institutions, that prefers to fund their

incarceration rather than their education, participants in prison education programs can create disruption through their mere participation in the program.

Because the prison is such a unique educational setting, it is important to understand the rhetorical and material situation within which incarcerated students must operate. At the Danville Correctional Center, students who have completed their associates degrees may apply to participate in the Education Justice Project (EJP), a satellite program of the nearby University of Illinois that allows incarcerated men to take upper-division college courses for college credit. While enrolled, some students spend much of their non-school time in their cells, but others hold full-time jobs, work toward professional certifications, or teach ESL (English as a Second Language) lessons.

Article co-authors in the computer lab during a WAM class. Photo credit: Education Justice Project

Students can take one academic course per semester through EJP (though many also participate in workshops and reading groups), and their three hours per week of class time is supplemented by an additional three hours of access either to the computer lab *or* to the tutors and library. Although the men are registered students at the University of Illinois, home of one of the nation's largest collections of books, their access to that collection is severely limited, so they must make do with the resources

of the impressive-but-by-no-means-sufficient EJP library. Pens, notebooks, and folders must be purchased from the commissary; a semester's basic school supplies can easily cost a week's wages. All personal effects must fit inside a small locker in their cells, so students must jettison old school work, readings, and even books to make room for the new.

Beyond the material constraints complicating students' relationship with education, simple daily existence in the carceral setting is incredibly contingent. A normal day can turn into lockdown of a week or more because someone, somewhere, did something that seemed suspicious—or just because the summer heat caused power outages (the cells, it should be noted, are not air conditioned).

Entire semesters are canceled at a moment's notice, leaving instructors to cobble together grades from less than half a term's work. Rules are unwritten and inconsistently enforced, the same action producing vastly different consequences from one day to the next, and students spoke of refraining from even innocuous actions—conferring with a classmate about an assignment, for instance—for fear of how they might be perceived.

Writing Across Media in Prison

In the spring of 2014, two instructors from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign adapted a popular multimodal writing course called "Writing Across Media" (or more affectionately, WAM) for instruction at the Danville Correctional Center. The class is an advanced composition course focused on the effective rhetorical use of media other than print text, culminating in projects such as street art, comics, videos, and podcasts.

Ultimately, WAM aims not just to teach students about the affordances of different media but to help them leverage those affordances in ways that can create social change, arming them with tools and strategies to actually intervene in the discourses around them. Under the CCF, however, it was not just the content but also the structure of the course that opened up space for intervention. In this article, we examine how collaboration unexpectedly came to function as one such intervention in itself.

A Note on Voices and Vision

The project before you emerges from months of in-depth conversations between the two course instructors and our ten student coauthors. At first we attempted to write the piece collaboratively with a unified voice, but unifying twelve people and including equal input from everyone proved a challenge, especially with no way to

communicate between meetings. Over several months we struggled to find a way to include everyone's voices while creating a cohesive piece. When the ban on audio recording was unexpectedly lifted, then, we swiftly agreed to address these complications by recording our students' *actual voices* as they reflected on the course and made their arguments.

Agustin Torres (foreground), Igor Kazakovs (left), and Christopher Harrison (back center) discuss
an article during a WAM class at the Danville Correctional Center. Photo credit: Education Justice Project

We originally envisioned recording multiple three-hour work sessions, to be edited by the students themselves. But as quickly as they were given, our recording privileges were taken away, along with a nine-month suspension of programming. In the end, we were left with only ninety minutes of audio and no way to communicate with our students. Because these ninety minutes were situated after months of collaborative discussion, however, the students had gone on the record with clear ideas of what they wished to say, and after having worked so closely with our student coauthors for so many months, we are confident that this piece represents our collective vision.

The first person plural, then, represents only Alexandra Cavallaro and Melissa Forbes. This was a difficult choice and is not meant to elide the voices of our coauthors.

Although this article could never have been written without extensive collaboration, many of the perspectives in this piece can only come from an instructor position. Be assured, though: you may hear their literal voices only in certain sections, but our students' ideas, questions, and insights are woven into all of our analytical insight. The form of this essay, insofar as we can, honors our collaborative process.

Subverting the Redemption Narrative

Our collective, collaborative work attempts to move away from the typical narratives of individual transformation and redemption. The narratives supporting most educational programs in prison focus on the need for individual transformation, typically characterized by redemption narratives that Erica Meiners describes as a progression from early problems to "bad choices" and subsequent incarceration, concluding with getting one's life back on the right track, usually through religious conversion (*Right to be Hostile)*. These narratives are the very reason why the PIC allows educational programs in the first place: these programs are seen as supporting the carceral institution's goals of reforming deviant citizens into law-abiding ones.

To uncritically buy into these redemption narratives, then, is to not simply uphold the logic of the prison-industrial complex but to actively participate in its implementation. Yet educational programs like the Education Justice Project complicate the relationship between the PIC and education by locating the system as the necessary site of intervention rather than the individuals who are funneled into it. Part of the appeal of adapting WAM for a prison, then, were the opportunities for subversion and rewriting we imagined it would bring.

What we did not imagine was that this subversion would begin not with course content or assignments, but with educational practices that, in traditional classrooms, are so ingrained as to be second nature. Collaborative projects are a pedagogical staple in many contemporary classrooms, but collaboration in prison settings—even for educational purposes—is highly restricted and subject to an ever-changing set of rules about what is and is not allowed.

Prison, Power, and Collaborative Processes

We argue that although in some ways the existing power differentials in the carceral setting are magnified through collaborative processes, in others they are diminished, blurred, or shifted. This is a risk: as the oft-cited Stanford experiment demonstrated, the prison dynamic as we know it emerges through the strict establishment and maintenance of roles, and any perceived softening of those boundaries is apt to be swiftly and decisively punished.

One tutor in the program, for example, arrived at the prison to find her clearance revoked; apparently, a corrections officer had walked past the resource room the week before to see her seated sideways in an armchair, her legs draped too informally over the arm. In an environment so intent on enforcing distance and hierarchies, then, the kind of collaboration required to create intellectual work is hugely subversive, potentially offering our students a sense of agency in an environment that is designed to deny it to them.

Teaching and Learning in (spite of) the Carceral Communications Framework

The following section was authored by Robert Garite, the student who initially developed the concept of the CCF. Alexandra and Melissa have left this piece largely as written in order to respect the student's authorship, making only small revisions where necessary.

Physical constraints such as concrete, steel, and barbed wire control physical movement in and out of the prison, while highly regulatory and confining discursive practices limit the rhetorical possibilities found behind prison walls. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault observes that these discursive practices have a direct effect on how prisoners come to know themselves and relate to the world. This self-knowledge includes the internalization of oneself as a criminal in need of reform and the acceptance of loss of liberty due to incarceration.

We argue that these discursive practices act as instruments of a larger rhetorical structure whose chief objective is to divide prisoners from each other and the rest of society. We term this structure the Carceral Communications Framework (CCF). The strength of WAM, we contend, is that it created a space that simultaneously functioned within and yet outside of the CCF, thereby broadening the rhetorical possibilities for incarcerated students and opening up a space for collaboration to occur.

In order to operate efficiently, the CCF relies upon a rigid power hierarchy. Prison administrators have absolute control over rhetorical practices that occur within the carceral space. While WAM instructors enjoyed a step up on the power ladder from their incarcerated students, they too had to follow orders from above, even if those orders conflicted with educational goals. In this way, the prison positioned instructors as gatekeepers, not only as guardians of knowledge, but also as sometimes unwilling accomplices of oppressive prison policies. Moreover, institutional rules forbidding fraternization made even determining how much time an instructor could spend attending to individual student needs difficult to ascertain.

Alexandra Cavallaro (right) and Melissa Forbes (left) observe student presentations. Photo credit: Education Justice Project

The challenge for WAM instructors, then, was to be aware of their privileged positions as teachers and de facto prison staff, but not let that affect communication within the classroom. WAM instructors had fundamental philosophical disagreements with the rhetorical limitations imposed upon prisoners; however, care had to be taken so as not to succumb to unreflective actions for which the students would pay the price (Cummins).

While one of the big ideas for WAM was to introduce multimodality so that students could critique oppressive power structures, the rhetorical situation of an institution governed by the CCF is very different than the rhetorical situation on the traditional university campus. While academia welcomes the critique of oppressive power structures, open critique while operating within the CCF can have dangerous consequences.

Theoretical, Rhetorical Graffiti

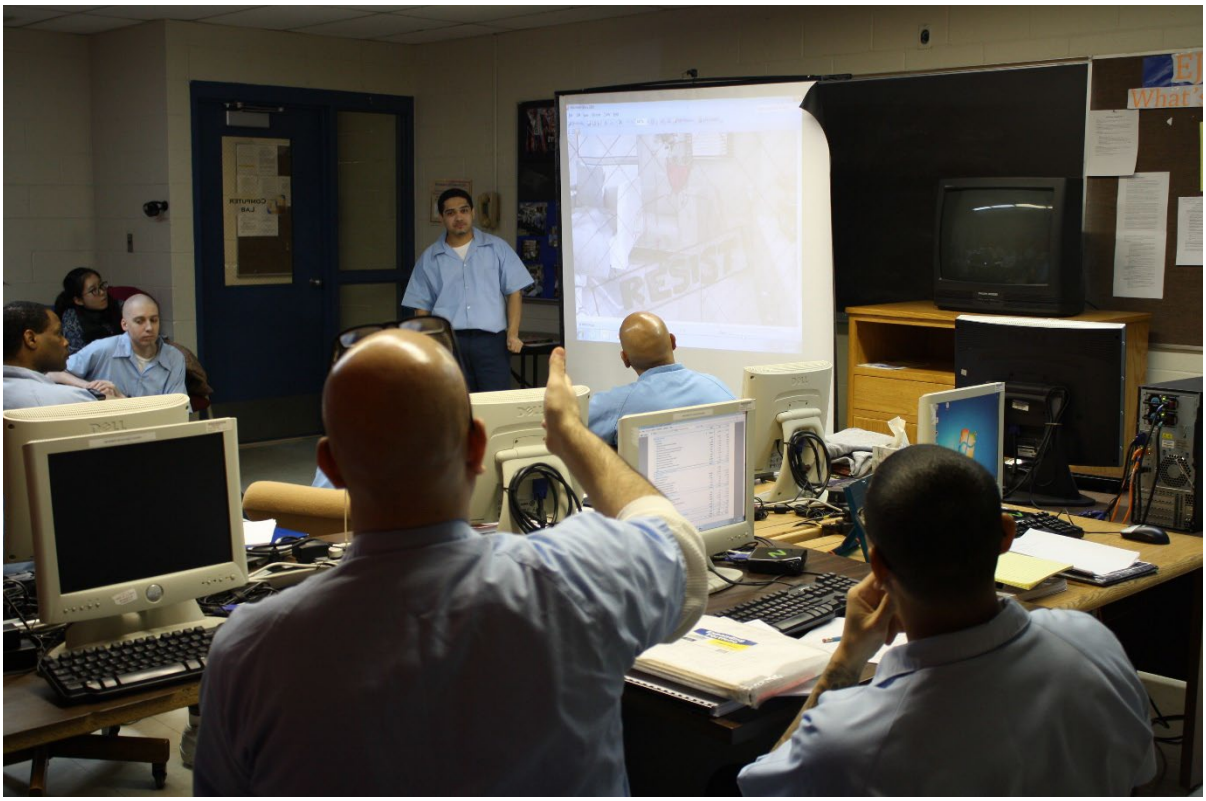
One illustration of the workings of the CCF is in the street art project, in which students learned about the affordances and constraints of graffiti as a medium, and the rhetorical possibilities of landscape and architecture. WAM instructors thought that

students might want to use the prison as a potential site for (theoretical) graffiti, and offered to acquire images of carceral spaces for student presentations. This suggestion was met with silence. Even though the graffiti projects would only be theoretical, students knew that any images of a prison would be viewed as a security threat by the institution and most felt that the risk was simply too high. In addition, some wanted to focus their energy on subjects other than incarceration because they felt that prison was a small, non-defining part of their lives.

The challenge was to create a space that allowed instructors to encourage their students to challenge what they saw as an unjust system while also allowing students to voice their concerns about being pushed in any one direction. WAM students also had to open up to the possibility that their perceived fear of critiquing prison policies was a manifestation of the confining self-knowledge that Foucault warned about. If a college classroom is not the place to critique the very structure that has the most control over their lives, then what other space would provide that opportunity?

The Confined, Collaborative Classroom

This highlights a very important distinction between a prison classroom and traditional university classroom and illustrates the insidious effects of the CCF. If experience teaches incarcerated students that challenging prison policies only leads to trouble, at what point does self-censorship lead to the devaluation of a particular kind of knowledge—the very knowledge needed to resist understanding oneself in confining ways?



Otilio Rosas (front left, seen from behind) discusses Luis Saucedo's street art project. Photo credit: Education Justice Project

To navigate this complex rhetorical situation, the typical classroom power relations had to be suspended. A constructive dialogue had to occur where both instructors and students were on equal footing, contrary to the hierarchical model of the CCF. Because WAM instructors were new to the prison, they had to rely upon their students to help them navigate the complex prison environment. WAM instructors listened attentively as students voiced their concerns about the potential dangers of using the prison as a basis for critique, and remained flexible so that students could exercise personal agency to determine the direction of their projects. Students had to reflect on the ways in which the prison institutionally discourages critique, and overcome the divisive effect it has on their lives. This dialogue united students and instructors in a common cause to fully explore multimodality not only in relation to the carceral setting, but also in relation to the wider world.

WAM instructors began to work side by side with their students to open up a communal space where knowledge could be co-created. The teacher-student boundary blurred as WAMinstructors became essential components of student projects. Because incarcerated students have limited access to information, instructors had to be able to see their students' visions clearly so that they could provide them with materials

relevant and pertinent to the project. Students were able to use this opportunity to intervene in important social issues, choosing to explore topics ranging from the ties between Wall Street and the government to Russia's ban on homosexuality. In this way, WAM opened up a collaborative space where students could define themselves outside of the highly regulatory and confining discursive practices that work to isolate them from the larger world.

Decolonizing the Classroom

We argue that, in this environment, the simple act of collaboration among teachers and students constitutes a tactical move with real effects. In her work on decolonizing the prison classroom, Anna Plemons draws on Paula Mathieu's discussion of tactical action in carceral spaces to make the case that small, tangible victories can create agency for those who are constrained in the prison system.

Tactics are not about creating sweeping change but rather about intentional deployment of the resources at hand: "[o]rganic, tactical work seems to aim low, and even when its sail *does* catch a breeze and fly, it does not expect that it has become a bird" (40). Agency in carceral spaces "rarely takes the form of emancipation, rarely gets to tell grand narratives of victory…Sometimes it looks like the penning of a political essay for independent Bay area newspaper, but most days it looks like fifteen men in blue shirts sitting around a table writing as fast as they can" (Plemons 18). Although complicated by the power differentials inherent in the prison classroom, the various dimensions of collaboration that characterized WAM pushed back against the structures of the CCF simply by virtue of their existence.

The constraints of the prison environment create a new and complicated collaborative relationship among teachers and students. But even beyond practical and material considerations, the student-teacher relationship in the prison writing classroom is a fraught one. This power differential is complicated to negotiate in any classroom, but the dynamic is heightened significantly when entry into the classroom is predicated on operating as an agent that will uphold the values of an oppressive system. To what degree can a prison classroom avoid propping up and reproducing the oppressive dynamics of the PIC? No educational program in a prison can completely avoid this problem, and while EJP places great emphasis on meeting the articulated needs of our students rather than prescribing those needs for them, there is no avoiding the unequal distribution of power and consequences in the prison classroom.

Critical Conversations: Student-Teacher Collaboration

Prisons often rely on the most traditional and conservative of educational practices in their programs. In such an educational model, collaborative work is rendered

unnecessary if teachers are the authoritative sources of knowledge (what Paulo Freire calls “bankers”) and students are the docile, passive recipients of that knowledge.

Our training in critical and feminist educational philosophies, which oppose these top-down structures, has profoundly impacted our approach to teaching, from our belief in collaborative meaning-making to our approach to writing as a means of intervention. But as Tobi Jacobi and Stephanie L. Becker point out, these practices “become more complicated in institutions whose missions depend on binary relationships of power and control” (34).

Christopher Harrison (front), Larry Barrett (left), and Antonio Walker (right) during a WAM class.
Photo credit: Education Justice Project

The prison does not welcome this kind of decentered teaching or collaboration between teachers and students, resulting, as it does, in the breakdown of traditional roles. For example, while students and instructors previously addressed each other by first names or nicknames, a rule was later put in place that requires students to call their instructors “Professor Last Name” and instructors to refer to students as “Mr. (or preferably ‘Inmate’) Last Name.” These are dangerous men, we are constantly

reminded. This is not a relationship of peers, this rule informs us; our identities are hierarchical and pre-determined by the system.

Yet even as the ideological circumstances work to pull students and teachers apart, the material conditions demand extraordinary levels of closeness. With students' available avenues of research severely limited, instructors must bridge the gaps, serving not simply as a conduit for information but almost as a kind of prosthesis. To function properly in this capacity, instructors must have an intimate understanding not simply of what the students are specifically asking for but of their larger intentions and thought processes.

As these ideas are refined through conversation, the instructors become more intimately involved in the writing process than tends to be the case in traditional classrooms. Since students simply cannot research on their own, these circumstances reposition instructors in relation to our students' work. Understanding how we can help them with their research requires much more intimate knowledge of their intentions and thought processes than is typically seen in a traditional classroom.

In this podcast, students and instructors reflect on how students' inability to conduct their own research alters traditional student-teacher relationships and influences the texts that students are able to produce, a process that reflects the dynamics complicated by instructors' role as literacy sponsors in a carceral setting.

Critical Conversations: Student-Student Collaboration

When we began teaching the course, we had not anticipated how radical assigning a group project as the final assignment would be in the context of the prison setting, both logistically and ideologically. The following audio segment contains a prepared statement read by Christopher Harrison and the ensuing real-time discussion between students of the CCF's impact on their communication with each other over the course of collaborating on their group audio and advocacy projects.

Concluding Thoughts

As we sit before our computers to finish this article, we find ourselves at somewhat of a loss. How can we conclude a collaborative piece about collaboration without the ability to talk to our collaborators? Because of the nine-month shutdown of programming, we not only lost the opportunity to record additional material for our audio segments, but also the opportunity to meet again with our co-authors. Any conclusion that we would write feels provisional and incomplete without them. And so with that in mind, we don't finish this piece as much as we point to the issues it raises for those concerned with lives of incarcerated people.

Our writing class was never going to dismantle the CCF. What we learned, though, was that the simple act of collaboration, undermining, as it does, the constraints and isolation of the prison, could be a tactical resistance. "The doing of the thing itself," according to Paula Mathieu, "has to be enough pleasure or reward, because being heard in a fractured public and making change in the world is a slow and unpredictable process" (47). Throughout our process, we had to balance our desire to undermine the CCF with the firm understanding that our students are the ones who bear most of the consequences, every time. Both we and our students found the collaboration discussed here to be delicate and often stressful, but ultimately rich and rewarding.

This case study, while in some ways limited in its local specificity, adds to the conversation about the value of tactics in community educational programs, and illustrates the value of alternative collaboration-based visions of education in prison classrooms constrained by the CCF. In a prison classroom, the power differential between students and teachers is heightened because of the presence of the CCF. Yet entering into that space deliberately, understanding that differential, and looking for ways to tactically undermine it is a powerful statement.

There is no grand narrative of victory here, only small stories of tactical success: working closely with our students to facilitate their visions for course projects, and watching as material we obtained from Google image searches worked their way into powerful statements about political corruption or a persuasive visual argument calling attention to the impact of gun violence on community children.

As teachers, we reject the idea that our work in the prison classroom is aimed at reforming or saving our students, not only because this buys into the PIC's narrative of itself but also because it concentrates all of the agency in the hands of the instructors. Small tactical approaches such as collaboration can open up small spaces for students to intervene in the narrative that the PIC gives them about education. This work does not dismantle the CCF, but it does open up gaps that are evidence of tactical success.

And so we do not definitively end this article. Instead, we pause and call for community partnerships with incarcerated and other disenfranchised people, partnerships that might take advantage of the tactical potential of both multimodal composition and collaborative work in community writing programs.

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Melissa Forbes is a doctoral candidate in writing studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and steadfastly believes that classroom writing should have tangible impact on the world. Her research focuses on online comment sections because she believes that they, too, have tangible impact on the world. In her off hours she sings karaoke, drinks coffee, and wrestles in costume for crowds of adoring fans. Only two of these are true.