

*Book Review*

## **Complex Lives, Complicated Literacies: Writing Programs in Higher Education-Prison Partnerships**

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Berry, Patrick W. *Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison*. Southern Illinois UP, 2018. 143 pages.

We are in a kairotic moment of scholarship for pedagogical and theoretical support for the teaching of writing in prisons. In the past few years, texts by scholars in rhetoric and composition have examined the complexities of literacy development for incarcerated writers, higher education programs in prisons, and the vitality of a humanities education for imprisoned populations. These recent texts offer roadmaps for developing sustainable literacy programs, offering pedagogical approaches to teaching writing in prison, and examining why writing teachers go into prisons. These books have grown out of a demand for us, as writing program administrators and writing teachers, to take up social action and activism, as we saw illustrated by Asao Inoue's call for proposals to the 2018 CCCC in Kansas City. These texts guide us in a call to action in light of the current political climate that aims to detain children, build walls, and root the American public in a deep-seated fear of the other, but more so this work is needed as we begin to think about how to educate the more than 2.1 million incarcerated Americans (Kaeble and Cowhig) who will return to our society, our workplaces, our neighborhoods, our campuses, and our classrooms.

For nearly a decade, the CCCC special interest group (SIG) Teaching in Prison: Pedagogy, Research, and Literacies Collective has offered a source of support for the dozens of writing teachers in our discipline who sustain prison writing programs across the nation. The leadership of the prison SIG (Patrick Berry, Wendy Hinshaw, Tobi Jacobi, and Laura Rogers) is writing program administrators, writing center directors, and

department chairs—WPAs are those not only leading the work on college campuses, but also they are organizing the efforts of teaching writing in prisons. Prison education has been showcased at the national level in writing education beyond CCCC, as the 2017 NCTE national conference in St. Louis hosted acclaimed prison writer Jimmy Santiago Baca as the keynote speaker. Attention is needed from writing specialists for these shifting times. There is much hope for the approximately 1.4 million former felons in the state of Florida who will receive reinstatement of their voting rights per the amendment to restore voter rights during the November 2018 midterm elections. An increased focus on prison education has been met by increasing federal resources. For instance, grants made available under the Second Chance Act of 2007 aimed to remedy some of the effects the Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 (VCCLEA), a bill that stripped away Pell Grants for felons living on the inside (the bill was originally authored by Senator Joe Biden and signed into law by President Clinton). Additionally, promotion of tuition-free higher education through programs such as the Tennessee Reconnect program and New York State's Excelsior Scholarship program can make college education accessible for former felons living on the outside who might not afford college any other way. The kairotic moment in higher education, specifically for writing programs, is to respond to opportunities and challenges for the incarcerated.

Patrick W. Berry's *Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison*, the focus of this review essay, looks at the intersections of literacy and the complicated issues that surround access to literacy and the privilege that literacy affords. Of course, these issues are not new. The profound stories of inmates who learn to read and write while imprisoned is most notably told in texts like "Learning to Read" from *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and Jimmy Santiago Baca's memoir *A Place to Stand*. Baca writes,

For in that place where life and death are waging war every day and the right choice is often the most difficult one, I was able to reach out and find a finger hold on the fragile ledge of hope . . . Very simply, I learned to read and write.

Language gave me a way to keep the chaos of prison at bay and prevent it from devouring me . . . (5)

The stories of those who enter prisons and facilitate writing workshops have also been detailed in books like Richard Shelton's *Crossing the Yard: Thirty Years as a Prison Volunteer*. Baca and Shelton's books offer personal narratives that document the development and instruction of literacy within the walls of prisons.

The subject of reading and writing are complicated even in the confines of college classrooms—much less in a prison setting. Recent works like Patrick Sullivan, Howard Tingberg and Sheridan Blau’s 2017 book *Deep Reading: Teaching Reading in the Writing Classroom* and Alice Horning, Deborah Gollnitz, and Cynthia Haller’s 2018 text *What is College Reading?* show that we look to build theories, pedagogies, and outcomes in our field to respond to the literacy needs of writing students; these texts trace back students’ literacy educations and the obstacles placed by standardized testing and formal literacy instruction while looking for approaches and strategies for writing teachers to respond. The disciplinary deficit is addressed in Ellen Carillo’s 2015 book *Securing a Place for Reading in Composition: The Importance of Teaching Transfer*; her book opens with a discussion about writing scholars’ responses to a 2009 WPA-L inquiry about students’ reading abilities, and Carillo points to respondents’ need to reach outside of the field to consider pedagogies of reading (1–2). Carillo’s book calls upon composition teachers to “use rhetorical reading to connect the processes of reading and writing” and locate ways to “assess students’ reading abilities, how they affect their writing abilities, and whether they are sufficiently preparing students,” so we may “commit ourselves to studying reading in ways that are recognizable and valued outside of our discipline” (144). She closes her book with a helpful annotated bibliography on reading instruction. With an increase of books that delve into reading theories in the teaching of writing in the past five years, it is no surprise that we see texts that examine literacy instruction within specialized community contexts, such as prison education.

The degree of fluency with which individuals can read and write is closely tied to socioeconomics; literacy is a determinant of the quality of available jobs, the possibility of financial decision-making and stability, the state of mental wellness and a sense of self-esteem, and, according to the Literacy Foundation, literacy influences the quality of one’s physical health (affecting, to various degrees, one’s ability to take medication, properly feed oneself, understand safety regulations, and properly heal). Literacy is about access and, perhaps most importantly, access comes from a space of privilege. The systemic issues surrounding literacy are compounded when considering the marginalized populations who are incarcerated—most often individuals who are poor and minorities. Some would argue illiteracy feeds the prison—or more specifically there is an “inverse relationship between recidivism rates and education” (Hendricks, Hendricks, and Kauffman 220). The US national recidivism rate for those released from prison is higher than 50%, but completing a high school GED in prison decreases an individual’s likelihood of returning to prison. If individuals complete

college education while incarcerated the rates for return to prison decrease. Generally speaking an individual with some college education may face a 30–40% chance of returning to prison, but that rate could be as low as 18% (Vacca 298). The most successful college program in US prisons, the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI) offered through Bard College, has a 2% recidivism rate; other college programs (Hudson Link; Cornell University; Prison University Project at San Quentin State Prison) have a less than 10% return rates—with Cornell near 3% (Lagemann 2–3). With success rates of college education for those incarcerated making such a difference, writing teachers can change the future for the largest incarcerated population in the world through working in writing classrooms within prisons.

Before I get to Berry's book, let us pause for a moment so I can mention two important books about one of the most successful prison education degree-granting programs in the nation. Two texts that highlight BPI, which has been awarding associate and baccalaureate degrees to prisoners since 2005, are *Liberating Minds: The Case for College in Prison* by Ellen Lagemann and *College in Prison: Reading In An Age of Mass Incarceration* by Daniel Karpowitz. Both books detail the robust operations of BPI. If you aim to learn more about degree-granting operations, then spend time reading these important books, as one (Lagemann) book looks at the implications for the individuals who have progressed through the degree program and the ramifications for society while the other (Karpowitz) offers overarching information about the growth of the program and focuses on reading, writing, and speechmaking within BPI.

The work of this review essay builds on books by seasoned prison writing professors like Doran Larson's *Fourth City: Essays from the Prison in America* (along with his companion project *American Prison Writing Archive*) and Tobi Jacobi and Ann Folwell Stanford's edited collection *Women, Writing, and Prison: Activists, Scholars and Writers Speak Out*. These books celebrate imprisoned writers by bringing forward the voices of those incarcerated to mainstream scholarly publication spaces. Jacobi and Stanford's book was one of the earlier books in our discipline to offer resources for prison writing facilitators and to meld together praxis for teaching writing in prisons. Ten out of twenty-five of the chapters are written by scholars who detail writing activities through feminist and democratic studies as the body of work focuses on women prison programs. In the afterword, Jacobi focuses on the writers who fill our prison writing classrooms, the critical engagement of meaningful programs, and the importance of developing strong resources. She writes, "Social justice projects such as these offer alternative ways for prisoners and outsiders to interact with each other, to find humanity within each other's experiences and serve as collective gathering points

for multivoiced stories and experiences from across the globe” (242). Jacobi and Stanford’s text sets the stage for Patrick W. Berry’s *Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison*.

If I had the time to read only one book on teaching writing in prisons, it would be Berry’s. This book is more than a methodological text that looks closely at literacy narratives, skills needed for writers beyond prison walls, and teacher training for prominent prison writing programs; this book also contains a thoughtful memoir about Berry’s trajectory as a prison educator and the humbling stories of his father who struggled with addiction, homelessness, and incarceration. In this concise text, Berry carefully weaves his narrative throughout his research illustrating the core of what seems so compelling to prison educators—these individuals who reside behind the walls are not a generalized number as society sees them, but they are human beings; as Berry’s tale shows, the “other” is us and our families. By way of ethnographic methods, data analysis, and interviews, Berry’s book promises to explore

the investments that incarcerated students and their teachers make in the power of literacy and higher education to rectify inequalities and improve students’ social and economic standing. It chronicles how incarcerated students attempt to write themselves back into a society that has erased their lived histories, highlights the affective connections between teachers and students in carceral spaces, and traces the power ascribed to the written word. (3)

Berry opens his book with “A Perspective on Literacy, Hope, and Mass Incarceration” where he brings readers into the prison classroom with him as a first-time teacher in 2009. Berry tells of how he carried the 2008 speech of newly inaugurated President Obama, “A More Perfect Union,” into class because the text “attempted to speak to those left out of the American dream” (2). He found that his students had a mixed response to the idea of examining Obama’s rhetoric. Particularly, he found that he made assumptions about his students and their political positions based on their demographics. As every teacher has come to know, the first moments as a teacher become a learning opportunity for the teacher more so than the students—just as it was for Berry in the prison classroom. In his introduction, Berry situates his study to “teach writing researchers and teachers about literacy, possibility, and higher education” within the larger context of the “staggering statistics” of minorities in prison and to identify Project Justice, a project at a prison in the Midwest “designed for students who had the equivalent of an associate’s degree” (17) as “a university within a prison” with notions of literacy in prisons (4). Berry cautions readers of celebrating

“literacy and the freedom it entails” (5) and his work illustrates the “complexities of literate practices in various contexts, especially behind bars” (6). Berry makes clear that literacy isn’t the answer to the problems that bring individuals to prisons and it’s naive to believe that literacy by itself frees an individual from their confinement—nevertheless the conflicting idea of liberal arts education allows learners to be liberated and freed, as Berry acknowledges individuals can free the mind if not the body.

In the introductory chapter, Berry offers the historical work of literacy education (Freire; Royster; Kirsch; Dewey) and then addresses the myths that education can somehow “single-handedly prevent crime” as it’s critical for educators to “recognize the shortsightedness of offering education and literacy as the answer to a myriad of social problems” (11). Berry establishes the history of prison-based college programs starting in 1953, the growth of eligibility for Pell Grants as a result of Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965, and then the problems that resulted from the VCCLEA of 1994 that eliminated Pell Grants for prisoners (13). Finally, Berry closes the introduction by setting up the book with the concept of “contextual now,” defined as the “acts of composing and becoming that lead to deep engagement with the world and one’s place in it as well as to describe the value of being present” connecting his study throughout the text, as illustrated in the three following chapters (14).

In Berry’s first chapter “Doing Time with Literacy Narratives,” he describes the value of literacy narratives inside prison writing classrooms. In this chapter, he offers “a series of vignettes that explore beliefs about literacy and incarceration through the juxtaposition of narratives—cultural, and personal, my own as well as my students” (27). A particularly strong perspective that Berry’s research offers is a reminder of how literacy is a position of privilege, “writing is implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, linked to upward mobility and a renewed sense of self” (23). Those of us who teach literacy narratives in any classroom know that this writing assignment oftentimes separates our students socially and economically. As writing teachers and WPAs, we often love this assignment as we hold a deep love for literacy. Berry provided me an opportunity for reflection for how I have not been more critical of the pain a literacy narrative may bring students who have struggled with reading through his discussion of “how little educators understand the lives of our students and the complex investment they place in writing and literacy” (24). Intertwined with observations about inmates’ literacy narratives, this chapter contains Berry’s story of the shame he carried as a young man about his father’s addiction to alcohol, uncontained temper, incarceration, and ultimately the illness that led to his father’s death. Berry tells of writing about these memories that he reworked

so many times that gave way for a “narrative to heal, to honor, and to teach” (43). Berry reflects at the end of this chapter that “stories can serve as a powerful social force that brings people together” and the text itself may have “the potential to help individuals reimagine themselves and their place in the world around them” (45). This chapter contains powerful ideas that resonate regardless of the locations of teaching literacy narratives.

The second chapter examines “Prison Business: Professional Writing and the Contextual Now” and turns to “an alternative way of thinking about college-in-prison programs, specifically professional writing courses” (47). This chapter piques my interest as a teacher who often teaches business writing to college writers. The two types of writing most frequently requested when I teach in prison is letters to parole boards and how to address the gap in time on employment documents. Berry asks us to consider how we help our students face difficult pasts and account for gaps in time. His response is to help imprisoned writers see “Prison *is* part of the real world, and the work and learning that happens there are valuable in their own right” (58). Berry’s students wrote application materials in a difficult setting, one we all face inside a prison classroom, without technology. Additionally, his students developed proposals responding to “how the education programs at the Midwest Correctional Center might be made better” (59). Berry brings together an audience of prison officials and community members to serve as the writers’ real-life audience. These professional writing documents provided students an opportunity to perceive not only “ways in which students attempted to write themselves from a place of confinement into an imagined location of possibility,” but also, inspired “change by creating proposals that would benefit not just them personally but also others at the prison” (67). The obstacles discussed in this chapter to teaching business writing highlight the limitations on imprisoned writers—both on the inside and the outside.

The next chapter “Remembering Literacy: Teachers’ Pathways To and From Prison” dissects teachers “making sense of their literacies and teaching, the connections they formed with students, the stories that stayed with them” through nine teacher interviews (69). Berry identifies prison education as a “deeply personal vocation” and the prison writing classroom as a space for “restorative justice” (71). As a prison writing teacher, my experiences parallel the teachers interviewed who identified inmate writers as openly assertive about their passion for their education (Berry 85). As Daniel Karpowitz notes in *College In Prison: Reading In An Age of Mass Incarceration* about students in his prison classes, “The students were just students, and my course was just my course” (8). The same kinds of pedagogies that work on campus work in prison, and just as research methods are guided

from teaching in a classroom on campus, so are methods that extend from the prison classroom, as outlined in Wendy Wolters Hinshaw's "Identifying Choices: Rhetorical Tactics in a Prison Arts Program." The case studies that Berry illustrates in chapter 3 show how each teacher comes away from prison teaching with stronger teaching strategies and a renewed energy for teaching writing on their home campuses. Unlike traditional academic experiences where teachers may be seen as enforcers of policy or disseminator of grades, teachers within prison writing settings are often seen as advocates (87). This chapter is an introduction to considering faculty training, teacher motivates, and the rewards of teaching in a prison writing program.

Berry's final chapter "Literacy, Life, and Mobility After Prison" summarizes the social investment of prison education. He argues for writing programs in prison because there is evidence that "providing education and literacy is an ethical imperative and a valuable way to support incarcerated individuals as they work to make sense of their lives" (95). Berry calls for "new models of assessment that encompass the various meanings assigned to literacy across time and space" (101). Berry's book is a glimpse at students who

try on new identities and explore new possibilities with a supportive audience, and educators teaching in prison were able to appreciate the value of higher education, particularly the humanities, and recapture a kind of pleasure in their work that had seemed lost to them as the educational world outside of prison had become less focused on deeper learning. (107)

This book, highlighted in a February 14, 2018 article in *Inside Higher Ed*, is a must-read not only for prison teachers but for anyone who runs a writing program because Berry offers a pedagogically sound focus on literacy, writing assignments that aim to prepare students for future work and life settings, and motivation for teachers' engagement with students. Berry's work shows how much there is to learn about the development of literacy both inside and outside of prisons, providing an overview of how best to prepare students in alternative educational settings as well as thoughtful examinations of what motivates teachers in the classroom.

The scholarship offered in Berry's book adds to the resources of why—not just how—to get engaged in teaching writing in prison. My aim in this review essay was not only to implore writing teachers and WPAs to read (and assign) Patrick W. Berry's book *Doing Time, Writing Lives: Refiguring Literacy and Higher Education in Prison*, but also to compel readers to consider adding pedagogies of transformation and critical consciousness along with the site of prisons onto the pages of your syllabi for courses for com-



position theory, TA seminars, and community-engaged writing—and perhaps if you are interested to join us by taking up the research and work of teaching writing on the “other” side. On behalf of prison writing teachers, I invite you to join us at CCCC for the prison writing workshop for rich conversations and to go out to the libraries, visitation spaces, and churches that serve as the classrooms of local prisons where writing takes place.

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