

ON TEACHING HISTORY IN THE PRISONS OF GEORGIA: A PERSONAL VIEW

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Introduction

Those of us who teach history as a vocation soon learn that, unless they are unusually blessed by being married to a rich spouse, they must soon seek additional income by teaching part time at another institution. It is a reality that most who begin a career teaching history will have to face. That reality overwhelmed me early in my professional service and demanded that I teach in an environment not considered "mainstream" by most. That environment is the subject of this article.

The following essay is not intended to be a treatise on penology or the criminal justice system as practiced in the state of Georgia. It is, instead, a brief description, by way of anecdote, of a part time history instructor's experiences in two of Georgia's prisons over a four-year period. I hope it will serve as a help to those who might be considering teaching in such an institution.

Motive

The prison education program in which I serve had a fifteen year history before I joined it in 1985. It is administered by Mercer University of Macon, Georgia, and is funded by federal Pell grants, Georgia state scholarships, and Mercer's own scholarship fund. The program offers a Bachelor of Arts in American Studies Degree.

After twelve years experience elsewhere, I began teaching in Georgia in September 1981 at the Macon Junior College. Though I prided myself on what I thought to be the richness and variety of my teaching background, nothing in my experience prepared me for prison work. Indeed, I am not certain anything can.

Because of my wife's illness as well as a low family income I took to investigating part time work, learning of Mercer's program through colleagues. My motive for undertaking prison work was thus strictly personal, and had I a choice at the time, I would have chosen some other supplemental teaching environment.

Nevertheless, I began at Rivers Correctional Institution at Hardwick, Georgia, in the spring quarter of 1985 and have taught at least two courses in prisons every year since, including a few taught at the County Correctional Institution at Lizella, Georgia.

Description of Experiences - Basic Instructional Matters

Although one class had as few as five students, the usual class size was around 20 inmates, with a maximum enrollment of 30. However, an attrition rate of about 10 percent was quite evident and regular. Also, the Lizella classes consisted of all male inmates, whereas Rivers allowed classes that were coeducational with four or five women inmates participating in most of the classes there. As will be seen, this provided some interesting situations and some difficult and sensitive discipline problems.

Also, the racial make-up of the classes was to me often noteworthy, though I have no socially significant explanation for it. The minimum security prison at Lizella was almost always 70 to 90 percent white, while the racial division at the

maximum security Rivers facility was 75 to 90 percent black. This racial composition was not consistent, however, with the women student inmates at Rivers at least 80 percent white. Again I offer no explanation, merely an observation.

It has been my observation that liaison between the Mercer Department of Continuing Education and the prison administration has been very light and tenuous, in that in five years teaching at two penal institutions, I have never met or been instructed by a prison official or administrator other than the security guards. Although used to this now and in fact enjoying the kind of ironic freedom it gives that I could never have anywhere else, it was, nonetheless, a terrifying situation my first time in prison. I was left to my own instincts as a professional teacher as to what teaching and disciplinary techniques I would use, not really knowing what I would do if a worst case scenario arose. In fact, because I really did not want to think of such a situation, I did not think at all about emergency procedures.

So I came to my first class one March afternoon in 1985. It is a 50-minute drive from Macon to Hardwick, Georgia, so I had ample opportunity to ponder my fate as I attempted, not quite so manfully, to keep food on a poverty stricken school master's family table.

Description of Learning Environment

To understand a prison environment, you must realize the human dimension of confinement, restraint, and locked doors. A prison is one locked gate or crashing door slammed after the other. This was my first impression as I entered the electrically operated gate at Rivers. After sign-in, my brief case was searched for contraband and weapons. Then, as now, I had to turn-in my driver's license, my car keys, and any other sharp objects and received, in turn, a visitor's badge. Access to the classroom is by way of winding staircases and narrow, dark corridors at Rivers. This old prison very nearly conformed to my Hollywood image of what a prison was, a suffocating cocoon of dark gray loneliness.

You cannot go from one room to another, one hallway or passage to another, without permission of a security guard and without his pass key. Virtually every door is locked. However the grim irony for my first class was that there was to be no security officers in the class with me. I was to be alone with 25 convicted felons.

It was my first impression, and it has been a consistent observation ever since, that in a common room and in large assemblies, most inmates shout at each other, posture, and gesticulate vigorously. I learned soon that small freedoms, when allowed, such as free unmonitored conversations are utilized to the maximum. To overcome this without appearing to be dictatorial, I would begin each class with authoritative gestures and directions. Busy routine was my emotional solution the first day. The passing out of texts, syllabus, maps, notebooks, and pens brought order and purpose to the class. Quick introduction to routine has been my practice ever since. Another approach has been to keep all inmate students occupied during class times as much as possible. Intense reading, frequent daily quizzes, map studies, lectures, and notetaking convey with them their own discipline. At once I hit upon the idea of a quiz at the beginning of every class. Occupied students, I felt, would not be troublemakers.

It would be comforting to think that I developed special approaches to these people as a means by which their learning goals could be achieved in a difficult environment. I am afraid, however, that that was not the case. The hard truth is that

fear is the primary motive for any technique I used in prison teaching: fear of confrontation and fear of physical violence to my own person. Such fear has never left me, though I am very careful to disguise it with good humor, plenty of class activity, and my own self-imposed distance from the inmates. For example, I never willingly allow an inmate to walk or stand behind me if I can help it. Never once have I asked an inmate his crime or sentence for fear that I would lose my teaching objectivity if I knew or that they might become angry at the revelation. However, on one occasion, quite inadvertently, an inmate let slip that he had been convicted of second degree murder and was serving a life sentence. Tragically, he also spoke of a wife and small daughter whom he was confident would wait for him. I felt as if the breath were being drawn out of me. A class day in prison is three hours long once a week. By that time I am slightly claustrophobic, and yet this man will most likely spend the rest of his life there. Since that incident I have avoided small talk or any reference to crimes and sentences (although unwanted information still accidentally comes my way) so that I will not be prejudiced, frightened, or over-sympathetic with inmate students.

Another helpful technique has been the use, whenever possible, of audio-visual aids and material. Color, music, sound--anything to get away from the gray sameness and stifling blandness and put some imagery to the ideas and events we were studying. I found the students enthusiastic for these and, indeed, have made two of the courses media-oriented, using some video documentaries available in college and local libraries.

Entertainment, of course, is nice, and fear as a teacher's basic motive is not particularly ennobling or rewarding. At once I had to ask myself what I could do that would be of any value or help to them? Soon on, reading and verbal skills became my goal for them. The semi-literacy and abysmal under-education was part of what got many of them in prison in the first place. The study of history, I reasoned, would be a means to an end. I wanted to make them better students at least. To that end I laid on heavy weekly reading assignments with a half-hour long quiz over the previous week's material at the beginning of each class. They would be required to know in detail what they had studied. They would teach themselves history with help from the media aids, with me to answer questions and occasionally lecture on a knotty topic. I was determined to make study, organization, and routine a good part of their prison lives. At once it became evident among many of those that I taught that even the small disciplines had been absent in their lives, and, of course, for a few, such discipline was impossible. For others, however, study routine was an obvious remedy to a yawning vacuum in their lives. This observation is meant to describe no panacea, for they had other motives for taking college credit courses and no doubt in other classes such discipline and good study habits were required. Still, though there was much grumbling, few resisted to the point of withdrawing from class. Anyway in four years, these methods plus my own enthusiasm for studying and teaching history have managed to work what I consider to be a small miracle in this skeptical era--there is learning in prisons.

Grades

The grade record is spotty over nine quarters. Most inmates prefer to withdraw rather than have a failing grade on their records. Often the governing motive is to have good grades in order to impress parole boards. Nonetheless, the

reasons for withdrawal are often institutional rather than academic. A man might be thrown in the "hole" (solitary confinement--used for a wide variety of offenses), transferred, released, paroled, simply quit, or not meet the stringent requirement of not having any more than two absences from class. One class of 21 had no withdrawals at all; another, originally consisting of 31 registered students had 19 withdrawals for various reasons. Obviously, no pattern has thus far emerged.

Grades overall have been good. Inmates seeking parole, others scholarships, some merely attempting to avoid the crushing, stressful tyranny of prison, usually applied themselves very well. For nine classes A's ran from 10 to 22 percent. B's were plentiful, there was only a smattering of C's, fewer D's, and only four F's, with most failing students electing to withdraw. Thus to me, prison offered no major obstacle in the way of motivation for those taking credit courses.

Some Class Problems

Under no circumstances can this be regarded as an ordinary teaching situation. The problems I had in four years, though not particularly unique otherwise, were, nevertheless, compounded by the prison atmosphere. One of my first impressions was that I was back teaching in elementary school. There was, and still is, a restlessness in these classes, a constant murmuring din of childish chatter, nervousness, and impulsive talk. I found I had to teach them how to raise their hands when asking or answering questions; otherwise the chaos destroyed any semblance of class order. Also I had to restrain them from simply walking out of class for a break or to the restroom whenever they wanted. When the women were present, there was some posturing and macho assertiveness among the younger men to impress them. Some of the women are quite young (one of whom I was shocked to learn, inadvertently from a guard, had killed her own child) and love the attention given them by the men. During films or videos students would pair off, and because of the awful acoustics, their delighted talk carried and became a disturbance. In as friendly and self-effacing manner as I could manage, I would have to intervene. Recently, however, security has taken to separating the women from the men within the classrooms with the result that at least the decibel level of the chatter has lowered somewhat.

Absenteeism is chronic during some quarters because of illness or time in solitary. Many older inmates suffer from pulmonary or arterial maladies, and often during class there is an unending din of coughing and wheezing. Often during class guards interrupt to distribute medication, tranquilizers, and repressants. Many students, male and female, had some form of physical disability, deformity, or visible scars. Many suffered from congenital birth defects. A significant number were heavily scarred or tattooed. Some had lost an eye, and others stammered or had other speech defects. Although I did not count, many older inmates wore hearing aids. Many came to class bruised or cut with evidence of recent first aid, but I made it a point never to ask about injuries unless they volunteered the information. Quite a few received minor hurts during recreation periods playing basketball, softball, or volleyball, where rough play got rid of the accumulated aggression.

Random "shakedowns" caused difficulties. Although not frequent, you never knew when they might occur, and they were frightening to watch as burly, heavily muscled guards with formidable billy-clubs (which I am told are lined with lead fillers) took the men out to search for contraband. Some men did not return.

Some Further Matters

I allowed two ten-minute breaks in the three-hour classes. In four years and nine classes I have discovered that nearly all student-inmates smoke and do so with nervous abandon. A psychologist colleague suggested that people who are deprived of their freedom will exploit a small privilege to the fullest. Anyway, the narrow hallway where we took breaks was filled with a thick, blue haze that quickly reddened the eyes and throat. Though I allow no smoking in class and deplore tobacco smoke personally, I never had the heart nor the courage to forbid smoking during breaks.

So far I have encountered only one incident that had the earmarks of cheating as two inmates appeared to be talking and comparing notes during an examination conspicuously enough for the others to notice. This was one of my nightmares realized, one, heretofore, I did not want to think about resolving, and yet there it was. In what was either a quick flash of madness or inspiration, I told the two that if they did not separate at once, I would give them both an A for the test, and I would fail everyone else. The room was heavy with stunned silence. Having dropped that bombshell, I then said I would leave the room and let the two offenders explain to everyone else why they received A's and all the others failed. It worked, and there has been no more cheating that I have been able to discover. The idea of collective discipline with all responsible for the behavior of one is an old one in prisons, and it seems to work for me. Had I failed to act promptly in that situation, I believe my mandate to teach these people would have vanished. Too many of them work long hours on prison details and study arduously to allow a few malefactors to ruin it for them. In prisons, I have learned, there is a very robust sense of fairness.

Other difficulties included behavior such as embittered sullenness and sulky posturing. Angry inmates seldom yelled but instead sulked in quiet hostility, often alone in a corner away from the others, again reminding me of my days teaching fifth graders. The causes for such behavior were varied and often for something out of class, but grumblings and sour looks came my way when a student took issue with a quiz answer or an assignment grade. This is, of course, not unusual in any classroom, but when it occurs in prisons, the instructor can feel a little uneasy. Early on I made it a point to make the final grade accumulative and the test grade increments small enough so that a single bad test would not be fatal to a student's final grade. Needless to say, I was very liberal when it came to close answers. I did not want an incident over a few points when it came to merely splitting verbal hairs. I am, of course, quite guilty of being inconsistent. I am never quite that liberal on any other campus.

A chilling moment came one quarter when a student drifted off to a corner and remained there alone for almost the entire class deeply intent with drawing on a sketch pad. He had talked to me earlier about having some draftsman's skills, and I was curious to see if his drawing had something to do with that. Indeed it did. At the end of class he left a large sheet, apparently for me to find, filled with a very fine reproduction of a Walther Ppk automatic pistol aimed at a man's head. A sullen and embittered young man, he withdrew after three weeks. I cannot say that I was sad to see him go!

Neurotic or at least conspicuously nervous behavior is evident in many inmates. Fidgeting and giggling, obsessive folding and unfolding of papers, whistling, singing to oneself, can of course be distracting and sometimes unsettling and, although not the norm, it has been prevalent at times.

At no time has there been anything remotely resembling an attack on me personally or anything like the threat of violence. Most student inmates, with very few exceptions, welcome the opportunity to study and work hard at learning something new. Many have expressed to me a new appreciation for the study of history and have found parallels to their own lives with the essentially tragic human drama we call history.

Student Comment and Concluding Statement

A few inmates have made comments. One I think is representative of all. Hear this from the "belly of the beast":

. . . I only see one fault in your teaching, and that is you want us to read and to learn to [sic] much to [sic] fast. There is no way to comprehend all you want us to crasp [sic] in the time allowed. This is a state prison and in here nothin [sic] you want to learn and your [sic] up against all kinds of detesedness [sic]: ever [sic] thing from screening [sic] to a volume of defness [sic] to homosexuals trying to get your penis and anus [sic]. it is beyond your emotion [sic] at the stress factors involved. But I'm glad you don't understand! It's better I gess [sic] not to know the sin of prison. I would not wish this on my own worst enemy!!! . . . Learning is good . . .

Thank you Very Much

Your Student . . .

Perhaps that says it all.