

Radical Conversations:

Part Two—Cultivating Social-Constructivist Learning Methods in ABE Classrooms

Bill Muth, Virginia Commonwealth University

Madeline Kiser, Tucson Inside/Out Program

Contact information:

Bill Muth, Ph.D.
4802 Sligo Lane
Annandale, Va 22003
(804) 828-8768
wrmuth@vcu.edu

Bio's:

Bill Muth, Ph.D. is an Assistant Professor of Adult and Adolescent Literacy at Virginia Commonwealth University. From 1980-2005 he worked for the U.S. Federal Bureau of Prisons as a reading teacher, ABE Coordinator, school principal, and education director.

Madeline Kiser, MFA, is a poet-activist residing in Tucson, AZ. She currently directs the Inside/Out program. Madeline has an MA degree and one year of doctoral studies in Latin American Literature from Stanford University, and an MFA in Poetry from the University of Arizona.

Radical Conversations:

Part Two—Cultivating Social-Constructivist Learning Methods in ABE Classrooms

Abstract

In many U.S. prisons an overuse of individualized instruction silences literacy learners and reinforces oppressive notions about what knowledge is and whose knowledge counts. In these classrooms, methods that invite learners to tap their background knowledge, reflect on their worlds, and dialogue with others to construct meaning—commonplace in K-12 education and even corporate HRD practices—seem radically at odds with top-down prison cultures and output-based programs. Interviews with six prisoners and on-line discussions with 25 American educators shed light on this national problem, and on the possibility of engaging U.S. prisoners in classroom activities that center on their views, interpretations of life-experiences, and day-to-day literacy needs. In Part One of this report (Author, in press), the case for social-constructivist methods was made, and prisoners' dispositional barriers and funds of knowledge were discussed. Part Two of this report makes additional theoretical arguments based on the work of Lev Vygotsky and presents views of select U.S. correctional educators. By attending to the ideas of correctional educators and prisoners, the authors strive to model social-constructivist methods in our study just as we advocate for them in prison classrooms.

Radical Conversations:

Part Two—Cultivating Social-Constructivist Learning Methods in ABE Classrooms

Overview

In many U.S. prisons an overuse of individualized instruction silences literacy learners and reinforces oppressive notions about what knowledge is and whose knowledge counts. In these classrooms, methods that invite learners to tap their background knowledge, reflect on their worlds, and dialogue with others to construct meaning—commonplace in K-12 education and even corporate HRD practices—seem radically at odds with top-down prison culture and output-based programs where quantity (completions) trumps quality (process). Interviews with six prisoners and on-line discussions with 25 American educators shed light on this national problem, and on the possibility of engaging U.S. prisoners in classroom activities that center on their views, interpretations of life-experiences, and day-to-day literacy needs. In Part One of this report (Author, in press), the case for social-constructivist methods was made, and prisoners' dispositional barriers and funds of knowledge were discussed. Part Two of this report makes additional theoretical arguments based on the work of Lev Vygotsky and presents views of select U.S. correctional educators. By attending to the ideas of correctional educators and prisoners in this study, we strive to model social-constructivist methods in our study just as we advocate for them in prison classrooms.

The Argument for Social-Constructivist Methods

Social-constructivists view learning as primarily social, and respect learners to interpret life experiences for themselves. Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) challenged and extended the Piagetian view of knowledge construction as the work of individuals interacting with their environments (Vygotsky, 1978). While accepting the idea that children had the agency to construct meaning for

themselves, Vygotsky argued that cognitive functions and language emerge from social relationships first, and later are interiorized as individual knowledge. Further, Vygotsky noted that learning is motivated by our need to make sense of the world. We use the language and culture of our knowledge community to help construct meaning (U. California, Berkeley, 2007). For example, Vygotsky reasoned:

A special feature of human perception...is the perception of real objects...I do not see the world simply in color and shape but also as a world with sense and meaning. I do not merely see something round and black with two hands; I see a clock... (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 39)

This *meaningful* act reveals the social root of knowledge (a) because it is shaped by, and constructed through, language (the word clock), and (b) because the functional significance of the artifact (the object clock) is defined by culture.

Learning is a collaborative process. We explore and actively work on new idea constructions in a social milieu before using them independently. We try out, explore, revise, refine, and extend our knowledge through social interaction with others. When engaged with others in this way, we are capable of crafting solutions to life problems that we could not craft on our own. Vygotsky (1978) refers to this social support for meaning making as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

Successful social-constructivist learning experiences, in prison classrooms as elsewhere, require social skills such as active listening, tolerance for diversity, and respect for personal boundaries. These pre-requisites should not be discounted—they may pose legitimate risks to some prison-based learning experiences. But, for some learners, prison classrooms may be society's last best chance to nurture these skills. Admitting that social methods are too risky to use

in prison classrooms is an admission of failure—not on behalf of individual correctional educators who often work within highly prescribed conditions, but on behalf of American prison systems and American penology. Rather, the problem of silenced literacy classrooms must be robustly attacked at the policy, staff development, prison-culture, and instructional levels, and the instructional activities presented later in this paper represent only one point of this multi-pronged effort. In this report the term radical is used to connote *extreme*—as in, “It is a shame that conversation-based learning is seen as radical in some prison systems.” But radical also means *at the root*. And to the extent exclusively individualized methods are challenged by this paper, the challenge is indeed aimed at the foundation, or root of current practice and policy.

However, in true social-constructivist spirit, the authors believe this project must be approached with the full collaboration of learners and educators. Their perspectives, cautions and creativity should set the course and guide the pace of change. To this end, a limited sampling of prisoners’ views were shared in Part One and educators’ views are reported on below. We conclude this section by calling the reader’s attention to [the Box] that describes a Tucson-based program called Inside/Out. This program puts learners—both incarcerated and in community-based alternative schools—in touch with vital issues of our time, and trusts them to interpret life experiences for themselves and with each other.

Method

This qualitative study positioned correctional educators and literacy learners in U.S. prisons as the experts. Each stage of the study—design, data collection, analysis and validation of findings—was informed by social-constructivist theory. The study had two components. The first component, reported on in Part One, involved 6 federal prisoners who were purposefully selected and invited to participate in individual open-ended interviews in which they could “tell their story”

about learning in ABE prison classrooms. Descriptions of rapport, sample selection, data analysis and validity were reported previously (Author, 2006).

The second component of the study, reported here, involved a series of on-line discussions with 25 U.S. correctional educators conducted in winter, 2007. Unlike the six incarcerated literacy learners profiled in Part One, the educators in this study did not exclusively teach in ABE classrooms, though the majority of their students were functioning at or below the GED literacy level. Thus Part Two's findings continue to focus on the role of social constructivist learning in ABE classrooms—i.e., classrooms where support for basic literacy needs is provided. All participants—15 females and 10 males—were educators in U.S. prison systems; 8 from Eastern states, 12 from Central states, and 5 from Western states. Sixteen participants taught academic subjects related to ABE, literacy, and/or GED programs. Three were vocational education teachers, 5 taught English as a Second Language (some also taught other academic subjects), and 3 were administrators. These educators freely joined on-line discussion boards sponsored by the National Institute for Literacy, the Correctional Education Association (CEA), or Virginia Commonwealth University. Some of the participants were part of the first cohort of the Highly Qualified Correctional Educator program sponsored by CEA and California State University, San Bernardino. All citations in this report are used with permission from the educators. The on-line discussions were held over the course of 10 weeks. Practitioners questioned each other about their experiences and beliefs related to prisoners' voice and the suitability of social-constructivist methods such as storytelling, role plays, open-ended interviews, and discussions.

Correctional educators in this study were not randomly selected. Rather, they represent all discussants that gave us permission to use their postings in this study. The sample therefore does

not constitute a representational sample of correctional educators in the U.S. It is the hope of the authors that opportunities for more systematic study will become available in the near future.

Despite this study's limited sample, the findings have merit. First, the discussions embodied an equally distributed range of *beliefs about* the value of social-constructivist methods ('highly enthusiastic' to 'not interested') and range of *experiences with* them (positive to negative) in the prison classroom. In this article the authors report a "dimensional" (Robson, 1993, p. 141) sampling of views that reflected a wide range of perspectives, rather than mirror the way 'typical' U.S. correctional educators think. This range of findings validates the thoughts of all participants, in the hope of engaging them as an *army of change agents* (Gehring, 2007). Secondly, all educators participated in these discussions outside of work hours, during free time and often late into the night. They represent a highly caring and dedicated group. We have no reason to doubt the sincerity of their views and pay keen attention to their fears and reservations as well as their endorsements, since they entered these on-line discussions in a spirit of critical-openness to new ideas. On the other hand, because a more representative sample of U.S. educators might include less-committed educators, it is possible that the current sample's comments is skewed in some way.

Since all on-line discussions were readily converted to text files, no transcriptions were necessary. After all non-related conversations and comments were removed, the discussions yielded over 37,500 words and 3,400 lines of text. These texts were coded using a constant comparative approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Eighty-five themes were organized into categories that reflected educators' beliefs about social-constructivist learning methods. Excerpts from the discussions were selectively arranged within this framework and brief explanatory statements were added by the authors. This material was sent to the participants, who were asked

to comment on the accuracy and overall tone of the language, and to note if any position (e.g., fearfulness or enthusiasm) seemed over- or under-stated.

Findings:

Prison Educators' Beliefs about Social-Constructivist Methods

Educators' beliefs are organized into five broad categories. Most categories contain views that both support and argue against the use of social-constructivist methods in prison classrooms. All views are considered valid, and the authors are grateful to the correctional educators for their honest insights.

The reader will detect substantial variation in practices among the participants. These practices are not isolated events. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007) noted that practices are rooted in cultures that have formed over time. "It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do...Learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning" (p. 294). However, even deep-rooted practices are not impervious to change. "Indeed, practice is ultimately produced by its members through the negotiations of meaning" (p. 294). If this is so, then insights about social-constructivist learning—such as those presented below—may serve prison educators and adult learners who strive to negotiate a more meaningful practice.

The Curriculum

Some educators believed that official curricula and program goals made it difficult to introduce social-constructivist methods. They questioned the appropriateness of teaching social learning skills such as listening and tolerance during academic class time. Yet others argued that the academic classroom was an appropriate place for such activities.

Stick to the curriculum. One educator noted the effects of high-stakes testing. She argued that even if teachers wanted to encourage students to use essays to reflect on life experiences, the prisoners would resist.

In the GED area, it is difficult to convince students of the value of writing in subjects other than writing itself. So many are of the mindset that they don't need to study it unless it's going to be on the test. I am actually more able to convince my lower level group to do various activities like this than my upper level class who think they need to be doing test practice only. [G2]

In addition to resistance from the learners, some teachers believed the official program goals served to constrain the range of methods available to them.

We are encouraged to stick to the curriculum and to the five academic subjects, so there hasn't seemed to be a lot of opportunity for role playing. [F3]

Social skills training. Some respondents thought their students lacked the social skills needed to discuss real-life experiences, and the literacy classroom was not the place to teach these skills.

I enforced my decision NOT to include this type of style into my classroom. With a group of ladies, all whom think their opinion is correct and simply will not try to see another stand on any issue, role playing will not work. I ...was crushed when everything began to crumble. I wanted to see empathy within my students, instead, I saw hatred surface and could not explain that just because one person has an opinion does not mean that their own opinion was incorrect. I will not use role playing in my room simply because my students refuse to exhibit understanding of other people's feelings and the last thing an incarcerated student needs is to be kicked again! [F23]

On the other hand, this GED teacher did use role plays to support social skills and build tolerance for other students' points of view.

A classroom is an appropriate situation for students to voice their opinions on the [parole board] process...The scenario [could] be set up such that those with the most complaints can play the role of the parole board ...With so many rumors out on the yard about the unfairness, or even racism, of particular parole board members, it might be an insightful experience for the students to have to consider the complexities of deciding the fate of inmates based on mostly second-hand observations and opinions. [F28]

Volatility

Educators discussed the potentially volatile nature of prisoner conversations, debates, and artistic expression, especially when the subject matter was personal and problematic. They reflected on the irony that the very methods that might engage and empower learners could also open a 'Pandora's Box' (see Part One) of emotions. Their concerns were based on the need to respect the personal boundaries of prisoners as well as their own capacity to manage heated exchanges in the classroom. In a recursive way, the educators' discussion about this became heated. Some were emphatic about their ability to manage these social-constructivist learning experiences, others were equally emphatic that they were not trained (nor hired) to do this.

Managing emotional content. Some participants felt quite uneasy about the intensity of emotions that could erupt from social-constructivist learning experiences, and their ability to manage this emotional intensity. Others felt confident about their skills, and saw these experiences as normal and necessary. In this example, an educator expressed reticence:

I agree with those who question their own comfort and experience to deal with something that could be so emotionally volatile, particularly in the environment in which we work. I

have agonized over expanding a "read aloud/books on tape" program within our adult institutions because the books we think would be the most engaging also have the potential to be the most emoting. [F 15]

Others acknowledged the potential for classroom conversations to get volatile, but identified strategies for managing, rather than avoiding, this emotion. One educator argued that social-constructivist methods were necessary *because of* the volatile issues that prisoners cope with in silence, rather than work through with others:

Team[ing] with a psychologist to design role plays that are...therapeutic is not an option for most of us. Yet, that should not deter us from designing workable role play scenarios that teach a lesson or simply allow the students...to empathize, [gain a new] perspective...[or] express their emotions and deal with their past...We have a video that we use in the Parenting...[about] a father and a son. The abandonment issue is...gut wrenching...[and] most students won't find it difficult to play either role since most students were abandoned as children...Emotional expression is a part of the human existence...I will allow that some teachers will be more comfortable than others in that sort of situation. But...our students live in a rather "unsafe" environment emotionally, [and can] ...lose the abl[ity] to express certain emotions and deal with them...Sometimes a classroom can become that safe and supportive place...[F9]

Others identified strategies for using prisoners' life experiences in more detached, less emotional ways. Emotional distance could be achieved by designing discussions about fictitious or historical characters, or by deferring the conversation until the learners have had a cooling down period.

My students are very resistant to stepping out of their comfort zones, and I can't imagine how I could motivate them to get involved with role playing. I have,

however...encourag[ed] them to see events in history through the eyes of someone who was actually there. This is a good tactic to evoke emotion and understanding and often helps the student to make connections with the content. [F22]

Recently two students have been before the [parole] board and wanted to vent in class. I squelched the idea because they were too angry. But several weeks have gone by and now I could use it as a learning experience. [F16]

I think most teachers have the ability to facilitate a discussion (you don't have to be a psychologist to deal with emotional issues). [F28]

Trust Issues

Another broad theme related to trust—staff trusting prisoners, prisoners trusting staff, prisoners trusting other prisoners, and staff trusting themselves. Especially in prisons, which epitomize “non-symmetrical relations of power” (Gonzales, 2005, p. 42), issues of trust must be examined carefully when social-constructivist methods are considered. The problem of finding safe spaces in prison has been described as Thirdspace (Wilson, 2003) Spheres of Civility (Wright & Gehring, in press), and a Room of One’s Own (Duguid, 2000), in which the “private self can determine its interactions with the public sphere” (p. 232). Regardless of how it is framed, the need to cultivate safe spaces and trusting relationships in prison classrooms is profound, problematic, and, the authors argue, possible. Some problems and possibilities are illuminated in the following excerpts from educators’ on-line discussions.

Staff trusting prisoners. Educators described challenges to building rapport with their students. Some questioned their students’ ability to direct their own learning.

Emphasis is put on the formal writing of the GED essay. We have a great deal of turn-over in inmates...It is difficult to form trusting relationships...a great deal of the inmate

population have committed very serious crimes... These men are not comfortable writing about anything except sterile impersonal topics. Perhaps, if I had them longer, a more trusting relationship could be established. [G 6]

In role playing will a student inmate be able to distinguish right from wrong and be able to summarize that good must always triumph over evil? The teacher needs to be in complete control and set the rules otherwise inmates will deliver the wrong message. [F27]

But some educators seemed open to the idea of giving some control to the learner. In this excerpt, a teacher describes her experience during a one-on-one interview with a student.

I felt that I was asking too many questions. I had an agenda. I was really curious to find out "what happened" to turn him off to education. He mainly wanted to talk about the adjustment to the institution (he is new). I finally caught myself and entered his world as best I could by really listening to what he was saying... Tomorrow... I plan to let the conversation go where he wants it to go, not on a path to satisfy my curiosity. [H2]

Prisoners trusting staff and other prisoners. Educators discussed the way students relate to each other and the teacher in class, and, not surprisingly, voiced widely differing beliefs about prisoners' capacity to trust others. Here are a few examples of educators beliefs about prisoner resistance:

I have a very hard time getting the inmates to [role play]. They will read out loud, do artwork, but when it involves acting of a sort they clam up. Given the venue I could give them a direct order, but in my mind that is a set up for failure. Most would rather go to segregation rather than get up in front of the class. [F1]

A few times letters have been inadvertently left in books that have been handed in or dropped in the hallways...the content was usually too personal or profane to even try to

locate the writer. Even if I had an idea, they would have been too embarrassed if I had given it back to them...I'm afraid most of my students would find their personal letters too personal to want to share even with their teacher. [G12]

Despite this reticence on the part of learners, some educators strove to create classroom climates that enabled student-directed, social-constructivist, experiences.

I also have a difficult time getting my students to open up and 'trust' enough to write openly. I, too, have a high turnover rate, and I have found it difficult to create an environment in which my students feel comfortable enough to let their writing flow freely. I'm not sure that there is an answer to our problem. I think all we can hope to do is maybe open up a little ourselves (cautiously!!!!), and maybe they will follow our lead. [G14]

I told both inmates that I was interviewing them as students, not inmates and this gave them some relief from an anticipated counseling or custodial [routine]. [H7]

I asked my students, is the education you are receiving while incarcerated of benefit to you, if so how, if not, why not?...How would you like the class instruction to be changed? I found by creating a question that allows students to see that you are not conducting the interview for your needs, but theirs, serves as a motivator for volunteers. [H12]

Teachers trusting themselves. Related to the issue of volatility, some educators seemed to have doubts about their ability to facilitate social learning experiences, such as role plays, in the classroom.

Role playing is nice but I think it drifts into the therapeutic and the result may not be what the teacher desired. If a teacher teamed with a psychologist and designed a scenario to achieve a positive result then it could be a successful strategy. [F 4]

I like the idea of using role play in the classroom, but ... I really doubt I could get the students to participate, anyway, as I am just now getting them to the point of coming to the board and working math problems in front of each other! [F 6]

I'm not a commanding person, nor have the booming voice for maintaining the control with inmates. My classes range in attendance from small to twenty-eight, with many variables for me to feel comfortable opening a sore spot or can of worms. [F13]

Other educators were open to social-constructivist methods, and found in them energy and insights for advancing their own teaching skills.

I interviewed two students who I have known for at least two years. I thought I knew them pretty well...but my interviews let me see a more complete picture! It was an interesting concept to just introduce what we were doing (tell me about what it's like to learn here and about your schooling all throughout your life) and then turn it over to them...I was amazed by what they felt free to tell me. How eye-opening this procedure has been. I also felt totally non-intrusive because they were telling me only what they wanted to tell me (which was quite a bit). [H12]

Some classes have been more receptive than others to using role playing. Most are scripted, although in some of the role plays pertaining to communication, the students have been able to experiment with running through the same role play using a different tone of voice or changing their body language to convey such things as sarcasm or impatience...I had to rewrite...role plays that required a female part; none of the students were ever too crazy about being the woman... Just this week, the characters in a role play were an inmate and a case manager...The students all agreed that there was no way that any of them could

play the case manager. I stepped in and took that role myself...it proceeded smoothly and led to a good discussion. [F2]

Borderlands

Educators describe barriers that impede social learning in prison ABE classrooms. These barriers involve other staff (including the administration) and the physical spaces of prison.

Wright (2007) described these barriers as “cultural borders” and noted,

Caught on these cultural borders, many teachers take up marginal identities... while they simultaneously face institutional demands for them to be police officers, gatekeepers and double agents or covert operators for the good order of the institution. They experience the tension that comes from knowing their students as human beings—subjects who share the need for love, acceptance and hope and who grieve and feel remorse—and the treatment of them as objects that must be kept at a social distance. Teachers struggle to find the right professional distance, or “relational mean,” between student and teacher. (p. 8)

For some prison educators, choosing to depart from an over reliance on individualized instructional models (or from ‘student as object’ to ‘student as subject’ orientation) will involve risks and tricky negotiations across cultural borders. In this section, participants reflect on these border crossings.

Other staff. Within communities of practice, one’s location on the periphery (Lave & Wenger, 1991) is fluid and socially constructed. Belonging and peer validation are robust forces that shape our identities inside, outside, and on the borders of communities. To take a social-constructivist stance in many U.S. prisons requires an act of genuine courage. Some educators seem to identify the official curriculum with the center, and student-constructed learning with the periphery.

For me, in my setting, my classes are to be used only to teach to the test. To attempt an exercise in storytelling or voice and identity would be career suicide. [G18]

At least in [my] education department, it [use of role plays] would be looked upon as play and no amount of discussion would change the director of treatment's mind. I'm not sure that our "Head" teacher would be in favor of it either. [F18]

I share your sentiments, I don't think my "supervisors" would understand what was going on. [F21]

Our work group is heading toward standardized curriculum in September 2007. Originally when it was explained to me we would all be using the same texts, but now it appears that well all are to be on the same page as the other instructors at any given time. [F25]

Despite these barriers, some educators shared their efforts to resist the silencing methods at the center of their communities of practice.

The idea of helping students explore themselves through their writing is one that I think I could introduce in some of my classes. If I can justify this genre of writing by then slowly incorporating it into the GED curriculum, then it would be a real win and be easier to 'sell'. [C14]

Prison spaces. Educators described prison classrooms as loud, overcrowded, and interrupted spaces. Participants perceived these conditions as a statement—often explicit—about the marginality of education in prison.

I began my first interview this morning, nice quiet room very responsive inmate who has an interesting educational history. An alarm sounded about twenty minutes into the session and there was a yard recall with a lockdown. Hopefully it can pickup tomorrow. [H5]

It would be nice if education could be the number one priority in prison, but this is not going to happen and you just have to work around security. This morning we had classification setting on the gym floor and trying to keep our students away from the classification group. This afternoon we had the students standing on the gym floor while the drug dogs went through the classroom. [H6]

Our students are regularly taken out of class for urines. We were told by the warden that we and the school took second place to security. [H9]

Despite frequent complaints about compromised learning spaces, some educators described classrooms as safe places where respect and tolerance spontaneously surfaced.

In school, it seems the social and cultural barriers are left behind. [Despite]...riots and lockdowns. our students are most often cooperative, and many of mine are willing to take risks...We have many spontaneous teachable moments in class. One of my students, at my request, got up and demonstrated "hopping" for the other [English Language Learners]. If a black student needs tutoring in math, they go to a very capable white tutor. It is encouraging to see school be a safe place. But out on the yard there are so many issues that appear to get in the way of education. [F 26]

What Socially Constructed Learning Feels Like

In this section, educators provide glimpses of successful experiences. Some read like epiphanies: something is happening to student and teacher that can not happen in isolation. These sparks seemed to energize and give meaning to the educators as much as it did the learners.

Radical Conversations. Perhaps nothing seems more natural and yet more foreign to some prison classrooms than open, two-way conversations. Here is how some educators experienced these events.

Today I had the pleasure of conducting an interview with my ESL students...I wanted to know what barriers they had to cross and are still crossing. I was very shocked by some of the stories I was told. I could see the love and respect that they had for one another...The students really enjoyed having the opportunity to tell their side of the story. It was a reward to me as well. I have a better view of how to approach their learning needs. [G8]

I showed the video "The Sky is Gray" based on the short story by Ernest Gaines. After the video, I asked a few leading questions and then just let the discussion flow. I was totally amazed at how some of the students had picked up on the various themes in the story and freely discussed them. [F3]

Although the students got very emotional at times and played their parts to the hilt, they were having fun...The students really bonded in ways I never would have suspected them capable of. I hope to make this particular role-play an integral part of my Pre-Release classes. [C 12]

Written expression and storytelling. Journal writing may not seem to be social, yet, we often use them to reflect on relationships and our standing in the community. Journals and storytelling provide outlets for critical reflection necessary to examine our lives and construct more integrated identities (Mezirow, 1994; O'Connor, 2000). Here are ways that educators have tied journal writing to academics:

A class journal has been very helpful for...learning how to write, edit, spell, and express...without...embarrass[ment]. Only the student and I had access to the journal...The students slowly became more open and honest in their writing once I proved that I would keep my end of the agreement...At the end of the semester they were allowed to take the journal with them and either keep it or dispose of it. [G3]

Sometimes I give...a [writing] topic which gives them a chance to share their lives. I love these assignments because it gives me a little insight into their lives. "A decision I made that changed my life was...", "The person who has had the biggest impact on my life...", "The reason I chose to drop out of high school...", are a few of the topics I have used. I have been able to establish myself as a person the students can trust, so I get pretty honest responses. These writing assignments have been valuable for the students and well as for me. I see much more transparency in the writing than I do in verbal conversations in the classroom. [G5]

"Hero stories"...allow the students to tell a story that would be personal yet not one that they feel exposes some weakness or discloses something they will regret...We could post [them] in the school and possibly send off to newsletters for publishing. [G15]

We are the recipient of a Reading is Fundamental (RIF) Grant. Our students will be able to choose a free book, postage included, for each of their children 18 and under.

[They]...include in each book a short letter to their child explaining how reading is important in their lives and supporting their children in their reading pleasures and endeavors. This is a way to share personal stories across generations, fences, and miles. [G13]

Role plays, debates and drama. Some educators perceived these group activities as threatening and too volatile for the academic class. Others believed these methods were appropriate for their classes. Here are some of their experiences negotiating ways to gain acceptance for these methods.

[We] role play...how our stock market system works...The simulation...is always greeted with enthusiasm. It seems to give a very strong boost to helping inmates understand

something they have never experienced and to become “interested in other things”
(Wright, p. 301). [F8]

When I use role playing in the classroom, the majority of the class participates...Inmates that normally don't want to do anything, take part in these lively games. ...[It is] satisfying to the teacher [F5]

I tried the parole board scenario we discussed...Starting out with the expectation that it might run 20 minutes, the students amazed me with their enthusiasm as we went on and on for the entire two hour class. So many events transpired in those three mock parole board hearings that I can't even begin to sort it out in some easily describable fashion, but...it was very spirited and everyone seemed to lose themselves in their roles. [C12]

One of the best strategies I have used is mock trial and mock grand jury. I have used fairly complex criminal cases and have the students prepare and research their "roles"...Using...Criminal Law to teach our incarcerated students is an incredible motivational strategy. [C2]

Educators' Critical Reflections

Throughout the 10 week period of on-line discussions, a number of participants revealed shifts in perspective. Though preliminary, these socially-constructed insights suggest that respectful dialogue within a virtual community of motivated practitioners can effect grassroots change.

I just realized that there have been a number of times that I have come upon students writing personal letters in class when they were supposed to be working on an academic assignment... We had one student a couple years ago who never wanted to do any of his classwork--he was always writing letters in class. He didn't stay in school very long

because he didn't do any work. (Could I have kept him in school by assigning him letters to write instead of math or science, etc.?) [G12]

It is important for teachers to validate a student's current discourse while opening up new methods of conforming to the dominant discourse. There is a time and place for all things...The dominant discourse...should be presented to the student as a manner of communication no more valid than their own discourse. [G11]

In the spirit of andragogy and nondirective teaching, I'd love to shift more of the responsibility for learning onto my students themselves. [C 9]

I have found myself becoming somewhat too impersonal with my teaching of inmates. I do understand that one must not become too personally involved with them, however, one does need some back ground information in order to be able to "break through" to the students in class. These interviews were very helpful in aiding me to do this. [C10]

What has changed for me is I have learned that I can modify great models of teaching to fit my situation one way or another. I have also learned that I am definitely a person who functions best in the realm of the social learning and humanist dimensions of education. [C14]

This personal experience has caused me to be introspective of how I have been teaching and managing some of my courses...I will be more attentive to using small groups especially in my math classes...This past week two students who are struggling with basic algebra have grouped to work together...By the end of the week, they have been coming in, getting started, using of the blackboard to work out problems and discussing where they get confused. [C 7]

I am using more and more of the small group learning methods and more creative writing techniques in my classes...but I don't know how far I could take the practice - yet- with "management". [C 8].

Conclusion

In this paper, as in Part I, the authors argue that the over-reliance on individualized instructional methods—such as those that typify some U.S. prison schools—fosters learning environments that silence learners, encourage instrumental but not transformative learning, and create tedious classes for both students and teachers. The case for social-constructivist methods has widespread acceptance in other adult learning domains (such as HRM and higher education), in K-12 pedagogy, and in the penology of those countries that subscribe to the principles of the European Prison Rules.

While the authors argue for the transformation of instructional methods used in U.S. prison classrooms, they believe that the thoughts, concerns and creativity of our students and educators should lead the way toward this transformation. Part One and Part Two of this report presented their views, respectively. We hope this two-part report stimulates interest among correctional educators, prisoners, researchers, policy makers, and others interested in the transformation of correctional education in the U.S., and we welcome your comments in the comments in the pursuit of a larger dialogue.

References

- Author, (2006). Literacy learners in prison: Finding purpose in the 'second space'. Building Bridges to Literacy. 2005 College Reading Association Yearbook (27), 19-34.
- Author, (in press). Radical conversations: Part one—Social-constructivist methods in the ABE classroom. *Journal of Correctional Education*.

- Duguid, S. R. (2000). *Can prisons work? The prisoner as object and subject in modern corrections*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Gehring, T. (2006). *Army of change agents*. Retrieved March 2, 2009, from http://www.csusb.edu/coe/programs/correctional_ed/articles.htm
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Gonzales, N. (2005). Beyond culture: The hybridity of funds of knowledge. In N. Gonzales, L. C. Moll & C. Amanti (Eds.) *Funds of knowledge: Theorizing practices in households, communities and classrooms* (pp. 29-46). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Merriam, S. B. & Caffarella, R. S., Baumgartner, L. M. (2007). *Learning in adulthood. (3rd ed)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1994). Understanding transformation theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*. 44, 222-232.
- O'Connor, P. E. (2000). *Speaking of crime. Narratives of prisoners*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- Robson, C. (1993). *Real world research. A resource for social scientists and practitioner-researchers*. Oxford UK & Cambridge: Blackwell.
- University of California, Berkeley, (2007). *Teaching Guild for Graduate Student Instructors*. Graduate Student Instructor Teaching Resource Center. Retrieved on July 22, 2007, from: <http://gsi.berkeley.edu/resources/learning/social.html>
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

- Wilson, A. (2003). Researching in the third space. Locating, claiming and valuing the research domain. In S. Goodman, T. Lillis, J. Maybin & N. Mercer (Eds.), *Language, literacy and education – A reader*. Trenham Books/Open University. ISBN 1 85856-288-0.
- Wright, R. (Ed.) (2008). *In the borderlands: Learning to teach in prisons and alternative settings*. 3rd ed. San Bernardino: California State University.
- Wright, R. & Gehring, T. (in press). Spheres of civility to critical public spheres: Democracy and citizenship in the Big House (Parts I and II). *Journal of Correctional Education*.

Overview of Inside/Out

Years from now photo books and collective memory might single out as being emblematic of this historic moment one toxic picture: that of a polar bear, stranded on a small, jagged patch of ice amidst seas that rise as temperatures rise. The bear looks frightened and bewildered.

The image calls us to it: so many of us feel like that bear. Alone, as water rises. Our planet is rapidly changing. Forests are cut, populations grow, aquifers deplete. Much more slowly however are new realities reflected fully in the media, in politics, and in school curricula. To cut to the core and reveal the underlying ethic of current national education policies, with their emphasis on standardized testing and personal “success” (and thereby and perhaps unfairly simplify the nuance, texture, and creativity countless teachers insert into their daily plans), in this time of what has been called “hyper-individualism” [McKinnon, cite:___], students are taught to compete and to consume. The gap between what they learn in school and what they see on their cell phones and computer screens – images of Katrina; images of the Twin Towers – creates an emotional imbalance, a silence which needs to be entered into and healed. Teachers at all levels need to shape curricula around it. More and more in classrooms it is possible to hear, in response to, “What do you see in 20 years?”, the answer, “Nothing.”

Founded in 2003 to draw incarcerated teens and those dropping out of traditional schools back into classrooms, and to make them see reading and writing through a new lens, the Tucson-based Inside/Out literacy program openly challenges this lonely-bear ethic. In this program detainees in Pima County Juvenile Detention Center write and share poetry anonymously with students in an alternative school, Pima Vocational High, and with University of Arizona honors students. Reading and writing poetry (and prose) are linked each semester to a different theme: “Poetry and Water.” “Poetry and the Middle East.” “Poetry and Stewardship.” All three groups share speakers also. At the end of each semester writing is published in chapbooks that are distributed widely throughout the city. Students on the “outside” read from their own work as well as selections by their incarcerated peers at city-wide arts festivals. Two short DVDs have been made about the program; it was featured at a state-wide arts conference; students have appeared on TV; they have read over the radio; articles have been written about them.

What is education *for*? At the start of each semester students are told that the reason we go to school is so we can better serve others. They are told, moreover, that what makes us capable of serving aren’t only those experiences which tap into our strengths: Our pain, our losses, our confusion, our errors, the damage we have done to ourselves and to others – these too enable us to give, and with empathy.

End-of-term evaluations reveal that students, especially those in detention, feel relief participating in the program because, first, they are being asked to think about these grave times in which we live, which form the context for schooling but which are often ignored, leaving young people to make sense of turbulence and fear by themselves (this unthinkable loneliness); and second, the fact they are told to embrace vs. ignore or tamp down their pain provides new insight and comfort. Not only reading and writing, but being woven into the fabric of their community, and treated as valued advisors about issues that are pressing and *real*, allow them to realize that they are more than just themselves, adrift, alone: they are needed.