

Resolving the Prison Education Paradox

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Dale Brown's essay offers a timely contribution to the emerging field of higher education in prison. Given the recent congressional vote to lift the twenty-six-year ban on Pell Grants for people in prison, it is reasonable to assume that more academics will come to recognize and affirm Brown's argument and do so through personal experience. One challenge of reviewing Brown's essay impartially is that I am personally enmeshed in the problems he is diagnosing, so despite his essay's admirable clarity, I had trouble focusing on the argument alone. I found myself distracted by memories of teaching in prison and my current efforts to launch a college-in-prison program. Evidence of my preoccupation will be obvious in this brief response, and I do not think this is inappropriate, as Brown's argument is strengthened by his testimony. There is more at stake in his project than consolidating higher educational aims to discover and advance the one *true* aim; I read the essay, more broadly, as an urgent appeal to change the dehumanizing conditions of American prisons.

One way to approach Brown's argument is through the aid of what Jennifer Lackey has called the prison education paradox, specifically, as one strand of the paradox runs: "prisons are dehumanizing spaces yet prison classrooms are humanizing."¹ For Lackey this is a descriptive statement. On the one hand, Brown's essay substantiates this paradox through his descriptions of teaching in prison. On the other hand, he uses it to make a normative argument about the aims of higher education in prison. As I understand his central claim, put crudely, eliminating the argument's flesh and my heart-felt affirmation of it, higher education in American prisons should set humanization as an aim, because American prisons shouldn't be dehumanizing.

Brown supports this claim by first consolidating the various non-carceral aims of higher education under the moniker "4Cs"—"fostering cognition, cultivating citizenship, preparing for economic contribution, and building character."² Brown posits (initially) that the 4Cs assume the humanity of students, but this

assumption cannot be maintained within the dehumanizing context of prison. Accordingly, the 4Cs must be contextualized and qualified to acknowledge dehumanizing constraints. With this acknowledgement, it becomes clear that the “more fundamental aim” of higher education ought to be humanization because this is what the prison denies students. The 4Cs will not be achieved if this aim—what Brown also refers to as a prior condition—is not first established.

Brown’s essay suggests that setting humanization as the aim of higher education does something to prison conditions. What it *does* or *accomplishes* could be more explicit. At the very least, we might say that the achievement promises to unsettle the “fact that dehumanization is a contingent fact of our justice system, not a necessary one.” More ambitiously, the achievement promises to play a role in transforming American prisons into places like Halden Prison in Norway, i.e., places where the prison education paradox is resolved, and there is not a glaring contrast between the classroom and prison. In a final move, Brown argues that perhaps we shouldn’t assume that humanization occurs in non-carceral educational institutions after all, as there are countless examples of dehumanization at play there too. So, higher education (in carceral and non-carceral contexts) should set humanization as an aim *because* American prisons and universities should not be dehumanizing. One might say this conclusion is unsurprising, a statement of the obvious. This would be a hasty conclusion from my experience. The force of Brown’s testimony must be recalled.

To illustrate what I mean, during the spring semester of 2019 I taught an Inside-Out course at a Midwestern prison. Inside-Out courses involve outside students (traditional university students) and inside students (incarcerated persons). The course, which takes place within the prison, takes pains to create the conditions for equal dialogue and relational trust between inside and outside students. Indeed, the first three weeks focus on community building and affords multiple “debrief sessions” for Inside and Outside students, both together and apart. According to the Inside-Out pedagogy the foundations of community must be in place before diving into the content.

The course was interrupted by a two-week Spring recess. During this

time several of the outside students went on a trip to Norway where they were able to tour the aforementioned Halden Prison. The first class back from the break, a few of these students provided a report. We listened to the travelers with rapt attention. Several correctional officers entered the room to listen as well, which was unusual. Tension began to mount as the officers began pacing around the outskirts of our circle, recalling who was in charge. One older inside-student, who had advanced degrees in business and experience in restaurant management, raised a tactful question at the conclusion of the reports: “I’m curious...if you could change one thing about American prisons, based on your experience in Norway, what would it be?” The room went silent; the pacing stopped. A dynamic outside student interrupted the pause. She said: “The one thing that needs to change doesn’t cost anything but it’s not going to change...” Her voice broke at this point, but she gathered her composure, raised her voice, and concluded with piercing clarity: “and that thing is... *humanity!*”

Humanity! The *that*-ness—or qualitative/phenomenal aspect—of “humanity” in her response stunned every person in the room and the mindlessness and cruelty of that American prison became almost embarrassing. What were *we* (all of us humans) doing here? The point of the story is that humanization as an educational aim sounds obvious, but for the majority of non-incarcerated Americans, who use prison as a proxy for social failure, there is no good reason (and few opportunities) to witness the inhumanity of these institutions. So, when the student said “humanity,” it didn’t sound like a truism but a moral alarm clock. Relatedly, Brown’s central claim may appear obvious, or uncontroversial, to an audience of conspicuously progressive academics, but it bears the same gravity and urgency as my student’s response. Setting humanization as an aim means something shocking and morally urgent is at stake for higher education in prison, for the prison education paradox is a contingent feature of American prisons and needs to be resolved.

I’d like to conclude by offering three suggestions for developing this project. First, a philosophical project can help us to better appreciate and understand the concepts we use. In this case, I think there is a need to continue developing the positive account of “humanization.” One concept to explore

might be what Bernard Williams calls the “human point-of-view” in his famous essay “The Idea of Equality.” Contrasting the human point-of-view with the social labels we use to categorize each other (e.g., “student,” “professor,” “citizen,” “offender”), Williams observes:

...each person is owed an effort at identification and should not be regarded as the surface to which a certain label can be applied; rather, one should try to see the world (including the label) from that person’s point of view.³

Williams’s definition, at the very least, helps me to understand, on a conceptual level, what we were working towards in the Inside-Out course. Another reference might be Jeremy Waldron’s *One Another’s Equals*.⁴ Waldron sets out to advance our understanding of “basic equality,” the idea that humans deserve to be valued and respected in terms of their capacities, not exclusively in terms of the merit accorded to the exercise of these capacities. Better articulating what we are owed as humans, regardless of what we merit, can support the experience of equality—in the prison education classroom or any classroom. This is the case because concepts inform percepts and discovering that we live impoverished or degraded lives, or remain passive when the lives of others are impoverished or degraded, can spark awareness and spur action.

Second, I think there is important work to be done on the ground by providing moral assessments of existing college-in-prison programs and considering, for instance, whether they are achieving the aim of “humanization” that Brown sets forth. Are these established programs realizing humanization within their classrooms and curriculums? Are they doing anything to resist, change, or resolve the prison education paradox? All college-in-prison programs worth considering affirm the dignity of incarcerated students. Yet “dignity” takes on different meanings in different programs. So, it is worth considering if particular programs are helping us move towards a place like Halden Prison in Norway, or if their position of institutional neutrality and their private MOUs (which, predictably, agree to disclose nothing critical against the prison’s administration), function to suspend the prison education paradox as a perpetual contrast between *dark* prisons and *bright* college-in-prison programs. The advantage of

applying philosophical arguments such as Brown's to existing and established programs is that it will allow claims to be tested, resisted, and refined by the reality of established efforts to provide incarcerated persons with educational opportunities.

Finally, I think Brown's project could better align the aims of educational initiatives within prison with the broader work of criminal justice reform. Brown's essay poses one nagging issue for me, namely, that it is unclear how the achievement of humanization within the prison classroom will resolve the prison education paradox and transform the prevailing aim of "public safety" that governs most correctional institutions in the US. Unfortunately, it is conceivable that a college-in-prison program could become better at meeting the aim of, say, humanizing higher education while prisons remain firmly in control of the carceral condition. This outcome, hinted at above, would not resolve said paradox, but suspend it in perpetuity.

The broader goal, I think, is to align college-in-prison programs with the broader work of social justice. Following sociologist Bruce Western, I think college-in-prison programs must participate in the work to reconceiving criminal justice in terms of social justice and leveraging their increasing legitimacy to ensure that departments of corrections "concede some jurisdiction over the policy task of public safety to other agencies—departments of housing, child services, public health, education, and labor."⁵ If this were to occur—and American citizens came to better appreciate that 95 percent of incarcerated persons will return to their communities at some point—then the prison education paradox would be resolved more holistically, through a coordinated effort, as various social services partnered to restructure the meaning of American prisons and broke up the present dominion of "public safety." At any rate, this seems like a crucial meta-aim for college-in-prison programs, for resolving the prison education paradox—i.e., the task that gives urgency to Brown's essay—will involve transforming the immense landscape and entrenched bureaucracy of American prisons. Given the enormity of this task, it is critical for college-in-prison programs to both recognize their limits and broaden their aims.

- 1 Jennifer Lackey, “The Prison Education Paradox,” *TEDX Talks*, 10/11/2019. https://www.ted.com/talks/jennifer_lackey_the_prison_education_paradox.
- 2 Dale Brown, “The Promise of Higher Education for Justice-Involved People: Humanization,” *Philosophy of Education* 77, no. 3 (same issue).
- 3 Bernard Williams, *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument* (Princeton University Press, 2005), 13.
- 4 Jeremy J. Waldron, *One Another’s Equals: The Basis of Human Equality* (Harvard University Press, 2017).
- 5 Bruce Western, *Homeward: Life in the year after prison* (New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2018), 138.