

Why Literature in Prison?

By Jean Trounstone*

Correctional educators know well that illiteracy is higher in prisons than in the rest of the population. The study of literature offers many ways to improve literacy: it gives access to language, reading, writing, a shared culture, and one's own self. Still, not recognizing the power it has to change lives, many teachers shy away from using literature to teach offenders.

Offenders need instruction in the humanities because the humanities emphasize values, community building, and cognitive skills. Only if inmates confront their thinking can they begin to change. Classroom discussion, as well as reading on one's own, can begin this process. Students learn by observing what characters do and how they solve problems, confront issues, and succeed or fail. In classroom discussions, students voice their opinions and hear those of others. In some instances, they role play characters. As they learn more about their characters' roots, they become better equipped to think their way through some of life's problems.

Research shows that in order for education to be effective in prison, it must be meaningful to inmates. Literature reflects the diversity of human experience, and a teacher who chooses wisely can find texts that voice real concerns for students. We have found that men and women often respond to different texts. Although Modern American literature is most accessible, classic texts can work well, as long as relevance is sought. Because literature offers a more complex approach, it can open offenders, who have a tendency to see the world in black and white, up to a broader worldview.

Educating prisoners means dealing with intense, often personal reactions. Teachers can use literature to help students learn to react with words instead of with violence or negative behaviors. Without moralizing, literature becomes a way to question, rethink, and rediscover values. Such an education lets prisoners feel a part of a group rather than outside it, and most important, it prizes each person's point of view.

<http://www2.ed.gov/offices/OVAE/AdultEd/OCE/SuccessStories/Part1.html>

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