

Society for History Education

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Source: *The History Teacher*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (Nov., 1992), pp. 61-70

Published by: Society for History Education

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/494086>

Accessed: 21/06/2010 08:12

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The Attica Muse: Lessons from Prison

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AT ATTICA PRISON TWENTY YEARS AGO, the worst prison riot in the nation's history contributed to the turbulence of the times. I teach courses in history, religion, and literature at Attica for the Consortium of the Niagara Frontier. The Consortium, an association formed by several western New York colleges, originated in 1975 partly in response to that riot. Acting on the premise that education rehabilitates better than license plate production, the Consortium initiated a college program which offers the B.A. at Attica, Wyoming, and Collins Correctional Facilities. Serving approximately 350 students, the Consortium's stated objective is to "provide a college level liberal arts education."

Student-inmates always ask me about the difference between college in prison and what they refer to as college "in the street." They naturally assume the differences point toward the superiority of the traditional college experience. Significant differences certainly exist, and they are the subject of this paper, but they are not what one might expect. Having taught traditional college for sixteen years, as well as in prison for the past four years, I have reached the conclusion that, in many ways, the quality of higher education in prison far surpasses that on campuses. Student-inmates read more and they talk more about what they have read. They interact more with the reading, with each other, and with the professor. They work harder and complain less than traditional students. About

eighty of us teach for the Consortium, and every teacher I have talked with agrees that the educational experience in prison is superior. Accordingly, a discussion of some of the differences might very well prove instructive for my colleagues “in the street.”

Student-inmates at Attica march in formation through the prison to the Academic Schools. The transition from “prison” to “college” liberates. They are more free, less restrained, in school than they are in the cell block or the yard. They recognize well this comparative improvement in their situation, and they do everything they can to foster and protect it. They tend to see school as an oasis and a haven in an otherwise hostile and violent environment.

This is not to suggest that some kind of “Pollyanna”-ish atmosphere exists in the prison classroom. All involved know very well where they are. At times inmates even joke about their paradoxical situation; at times I joke with them. One meeting before spring break, when I doubled the reading assignment, the class complained good-heartedly. I, with equal good-heartedness, remarked that since none of them would be going down to Florida for spring break they could easily handle the extra work. A student replied that the sun still shines in the yard nonetheless and that spring break by definition is a break. Inmates still insist, however, that the classroom is and should be radically different from the rest of the prison. In the classroom they assume the spirit of free inquiry. In the classroom they can question, they can express doubts, they can think aloud, and they can challenge me and each other. They can do all this in a climate of comparative security. In short, they feel free to enter into the freedom of inquiry and debate which historically characterized the community of scholars in a traditional academic setting.

An incident in my first term teaching for the Consortium forcefully impressed this attitude upon me. One of the classes I taught at Attica was an upper-level course on the Reformation. About six weeks into term I returned the first essay exam one night right before the break. One student, extremely upset with his “C-” grade, entered into vigorous debate with me during the break. After a couple of minutes he faltered a little in self-control, tore his exam up into tiny pieces, and threw a few profanities my way. At that point I expelled him from the class. I then talked with a couple of other students about their papers and went down to the college office for a cup of coffee. When I returned to the classroom the student in question also returned to his seat. I reminded him I had expelled him and told him to leave. He remained sitting, I called for the guard, and the officer escorted him out of the classroom. The class then precipitated a discussion of this incident. They were upset, and to a degree they were upset with me. They were not angry over the fact I had stood

my ground; they agreed he had been disruptive. Rather, they were upset over the fact that I had called the guard in. They thought I should have let them handle the situation. From their point of view I had violated the sanctity of the classroom. By bringing the guard in I had allowed the prison to intrude upon the college. I responded that I had to maintain control in the classroom, that the student had crossed the line, and that had the situation occurred on campus I would have handled it in the same way. In the aftermath of this incident, after suitable reports filed, counseling between the student and Consortium personnel, and an apology, the student completed the course. My point is to emphasize inmate sensitivity to the precariousness of their college environment. The prison classroom in the final analysis remains a *prison* classroom; yet, it is separated from the rest of the prison. The wall of separation is nurtured and protected by the students and acknowledged, albeit reluctantly, by prison personnel.

A relevant observation follows from this, I think, with regard to college “in the street.” Inmates keenly focus on a point many of us, professors as well as students, tend to forget. Many times while teaching in the traditional college environment I have heard complaints to the effect that college is not like the real world. Unless college approximates the real world, runs the argument, it is irrelevant and illusionary. Accordingly, we should restructure everything from curricula to classroom department to reflect the real world. I have always believed, and my prison experience has confirmed it, that the uniqueness of the college environment is precisely the point of the college environment. College is not supposed to mirror the real world. It is supposed to be the kind of place that student-inmates routinely assume it to be. Some of our problems “in the street” stem from a failure to recognize this point. A growing concern on traditional campuses over the past few years, as manifested in faculty meetings for example, relates to increasingly immature class behavior among undergraduates. I am surprised that we are surprised, given the prevalent attitude that there should be no difference between college and the real world. That many adults in the real world behave irresponsibly or immaturely can be confirmed by a visit to any tavern on a Friday or Saturday night or to a pro football game. College is supposed to be better than the real world. For example, the current fashion among young men is the baseball cap. At term’s start they tend to saunter into class and take their seats cap perched on head. A few good-natured remarks on my part usually ends this practice. Some might argue that my preference for removing caps in class is trivial. I disagree. It serves as a reminder that there are differences between the classroom and the real world. It gently reminds students that behavior and attitudes acceptable on the beach are not acceptable among the community of scholars. The English, with their

insistence on academic gowns worn to class by student and professor alike, recognize this. I do not suggest that we do the same, but somewhere between cap and gown and baseball caps there must be a happy medium.

Perhaps campuses could imitate Consortium orientation procedure. Consortium personnel provide instruction on how to be a student before student-inmates are introduced into college classes. They are advised not only on study skills, but on proper classroom behavior as well. Moreover, professors and Consortium staff periodically conduct colloquies which center on the process and purpose of higher education. Typically these informal affairs revolve around small groups in which two professors interact with seven or eight student-inmates. Dialogue focuses on what student-inmates expect from their education and what we as their teachers expect their education to accomplish for them. This format could be applied "to the street" with profit. I often think our traditional students have only a hazy notion as to what we expect from them. Campus orientation sessions could include similar interplay between students and faculty to clarify our respective hopes and expectations relative to the college experience.

Differences between prison and campus classrooms extend beyond the physical environment into the area of course content. I teach courses in the humanities. Many of my traditional students display tremendous hostility toward the material they must master. They demonstrate a "why do I have to learn about all these dead people with their dead ideas written in dead books" kind of attitude. Because of my experiences in prison, I no longer engage students in debate over the relevance of the material. Student-inmates do not expect any direct correlation between the material and the real world. Incarcerated as many are, for ten or twenty years, a discipline's applicability to their employment prospects seems immaterial. Ironically, prison frees student-inmates to approach various subjects on their own intrinsic merits without being shackled by questions of relevance. The Consortium deliberately encourages this attitude. "The Consortium should be carefully contrasted," states the Student Handbook, "with other programs whose main purpose is to train people for particular job functions."

When I first started teaching college I routinely devoted class time to the question of why we study history. I now believe this practice to be counter-productive. I suspect most students see any kind of justification of their disciplines by their professors as self-serving. Over the span of a couple of years I began, unconsciously I think, to carry my prison persona with me into the traditional classroom. I began to act as if the material's importance and worth were self-evident. I believe students react positively to this. At any rate, several years now have passed since a student openly

challenged the significance of the material I teach. Some years ago Paul Newman played a lawyer in the film "The Verdict." "If you act as if you have faith, faith will be given to you," he instructs the jury in his closing arguments, and "if you act as if you are just, justice will be given to you." I like that; I think it applicable to our situation in the classroom. When we act as if we expect our students to behave as members of the community of scholars, they usually respond in kind. After all, humans "tend to turn into the thing they are pretending to be," as C. S. Lewis's veteran devil, Screwtape, informed the novice, Wormwood. Once we get students into the pattern of behaving like scholars who belong in the classroom, instead of behaving like visitors to the classroom, we can proceed to the task at hand.

A few words about the methodologies pertinent to prison teaching are appropriate. Student-inmates represent the entire spectrum of academic, ethnic, social, and economic backgrounds. Some student-inmates come from comfortable backgrounds. Many more, of course, do not. As a rule classes divide equally into Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics. Student-inmates vary also in terms of their criminal backgrounds. Although professors are not formally informed on individual criminal backgrounds, we learn much from informal channels. A typical class includes men convicted of drug offenses, sexual offenses, armed robbery, and murder. While some men have accumulated college credits from traditional campuses, many have just received their GED two weeks before class begins. Prison classes, in short, are much more diverse than classes "in the street." Obvious problems follow from this varied demographic profile. Considered as a group, for example, the typical prison class is not as well prepared academically as its traditional counterpart. Somewhat surprisingly, then, prison classes routinely work their way through more material than traditional classes on campus. For example, I teach a freshman-level introduction course in religious studies. In addition to the 1500 pages of required text reading, I also ask the inmates to read a few books from the Old Testament, the Gospels, and St. Paul's Epistles. This reading load significantly exceeds the work I can realistically expect from students in traditional classes. "In the street" I count myself fortunate if I can coax freshmen to read 700 pages a term. Indeed, by way of contrast, recently fully one-third of my two freshmen classes in American history complained to the administration because I had required them to finish their 500 page textbook by midterm.

In prison I succeed in getting most students to complete the reading and even to understand a fair amount of it. The assignments for the religion course are difficult: Plato, St. Augustine, St. Aquinas, Descartes, Hume, and Kierkegaard. Moreover, many inmates are completely unfamiliar

with the Bible. Yet, in spite of volume and difficulty, most have already completed a fair amount of the reading by the time I meet the first class. Student-inmates, in short, are prepared to work. It is of tremendous help, of course, that they really have no alternative. Prisons are not very democratic. It is not likely that inmates will complain to prison officials about the work load. Professors are spared the dreary spectacle of students and administrators discussing whether we are too hard. We pamper our students "in the street." A little less democracy and a little more "march-or-die" atmosphere might improve their academic skills and their characters.

Along with a readiness to do the reading, student-inmates enthusiastically enter into classroom discussion. Their eager attitude provides an entirely new facet to the classroom experience. As is well known, it is extremely difficult to engage traditional students, especially at the freshman level, in any meaningful classroom discussion. In part this is due to the fact that on any given day most students have not completed the reading. It is also due in part to the prevailing attitude on campuses that intelligent discussion is somehow demeaning and dumb. Add to this the paucity of discussion in their homes, and among their peers, and you have an obviously deplorable situation. Teachers end up having discussion with themselves: class discussion in a vacuum.

Nature, I think, abhors a vacuum in the prison classroom. The last time I taught Western Civilization at prison, for example, in addition to the textbook I assigned *The Republic*, *Utopia*, and *Candide*. By the first class students had already read about half of Plato and insisted on discussing his ideas. "Concerning justice, what is it?" ponders Socrates in the opening pages, and the students launched into sustained discussion over the next several weeks in an attempt to answer the question. In the introductory religion classes I often end the term with a three-hour debate on such questions as God's existence or the possibility of structuring an equitable and stable society without religion. In the Reformation class I sometimes schedule a debate on Luther's proposition for the Heidelberg Disputation that "free will after the fall is nothing but a word"; or, the students convene as the "College of Cardinals" and are told it is 1520 and they are to come up with a solution to the Luther problem. Last year I taught an upper-level English course, Religious Themes in Modern Literature, in which students read Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Blake's *Songs of Innocence & Experience*, Goethe's *Faust*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea*, and Lewis's *The Pilgrim's Regress*. At term's end I assigned each student an author or a character. One student became Mephistopheles, another Blake, another Captain Ahab, and so on. We then had a round-table

discussion in which students engaged each other in conversation, in character, over such issues as the origins and nature of evil or the existence of free will.

On occasion I have succeeded in conducting such debates “in the street.” Last summer, for example, the Heidelberg Disputation scenario worked well with my Reformation class. Much of its success, however, resulted from circumstances unique to the summer session. Summer school students are often trying to graduate early and so are more ambitious and academically oriented than their peers. The fact that classes run an hour-and-twenty minutes five days a week helps to foster a sense of group cohesiveness. This sense of identity follows as well from the fact that many of the students permanently reside in a typical small college town, and so they know each other. This situation parallels somewhat that in prison, where most of the student-inmates know each other well before we meet in class. Students in prison tend to talk among themselves outside of class about the course material. Of course, they have few distractions to tempt them. Prisons offer little in the way of amenities. Among the distractions which beguile traditional students are drugs and alcohol. Substance abuse does not much pertain to the prison environment. Many student-inmates have experienced difficulty in this area previous to incarceration and many of these men participate in various rehabilitation programs while in prison. On campuses I have noticed that, in general, student performance rises as the legal drinking age rises. The comparative Spartan living conditions in prison help create a spirit of collegiality which colleges have lost. I once half-seriously suggested to one of the deans that the college prohibit cars and any item that requires electricity, typewriters and computers emptied, and institute mandatory “study-halls” at night in order to improve the school’s academic atmosphere. More realistically, perhaps, I encourage my traditional students to take some time during their small group discussions to get to know each other. I also grade the class as a whole on their general demeanor at term’s end. Prison naturally creates an environment conducive to class cohesiveness; “in the street” we must artificially generate collegiality. I have a colleague who develops a sense of class identity by having his students produce videos in which early modern literary sources are transformed onto the screen. His students write the script, decide issues of staging and wardrobe, act, and edit the film. We must recognize that the quality of education falls in proportion to the number of distractions. Reduce the distractions, create a sense of scholarly community, and the level of class discussion and the quality of education in general improves.

Some of the most significant differences between campus and prison result from the unique emotional and physical environment which sur-

rounds the prison classroom. Undeniably, the prison's atmosphere intrudes upon teachers as well as students. Professors are subject to the administrative and security procedures of the prison. Briefcases, purses, clothing, and all personal items are searched upon entrance into the prison. On occasion even the contents of my wallet have been searched. Any item considered questionable by the officer on duty is not permitted into the prison. My fountain pen has been temporarily confiscated several times on the grounds it might be a weapon in the wrong hands. After this scrutiny, and having cleared the metal detector, professors then proceed to the academic facility. At Attica we walk through the corridors to "Times Square," which is the intersection of all four cell blocks, past the chapel and on to the "Academic Schools." To cover this distance of about 200 yards usually takes five minutes, as periodically gates must be opened and identity cards presented to guards. Sometimes, however, delays occur. One evening I was walking to class with a colleague who had taught with the Consortium for more than ten years. His hair had turned completely gray and he had put on some fifty pounds since his picture had been taken for his identity card. A guard, asking to see our IDs, doubted my friend's identity. I vouched for him, but since my picture had been taken I had lost about twenty pounds and no longer wore glasses, and so I was not above suspicion either. My friend had to present his driver's license before he could continue. On another occasion, as I was walking by myself to school, a guard stopped me and proceeded to quiz me for three or four minutes as to what I was teaching, what the books were about that I was using, and other aspects of my craft. Often we must wait while a group of prisoners receive their medication from medical personnel at Times Square. A stabbing in the mess hall once delayed us a half-hour. Once inside the Academic Schools we receive our rosters from the college office, which is staffed by student clerks, and our classroom keys from the guard. There are about ten classrooms, and a guard is stationed at the end of the hallway. Classes run for three hours in the evening, with a fifteen-minute break, over a fifteen-week period. Night classes are dictated by the fact that not only teachers but students work during the day. I usually teach two courses a term which brings me to the prison two nights a week. Most students take four classes a term.

This daily routine makes professors acutely conscious of the restraints of prison. Prisons are designed to intimidate, and they perform that function exceptionally well. Prison administrators tend to view with suspicion any intrusion by "outsiders" into their institution. Administrators are not intentionally malicious; their primary concern is that we do not compromise their security or control. Article 13 of Attica's "Rules and Regulations," for example, states:

In your contacts outside the correctional facility use discretion in revealing information you have acquired in the course of performing your service. Check with the appropriate staff if you are doubtful about what requires confidentiality.

The differences between prison and the outside world strongly affects professors, especially since we enjoy tremendous freedom in our daily routines. The general effect of the prison mind-set on teachers tends to create stress. I have never taken the walk from the front gate to the classroom without some degree of apprehension. Likewise, I have never walked out of a prison without a sense of relief. The overall impact of this atmosphere on our teaching effectiveness is difficult to gauge objectively. My belief is it gets the adrenaline flowing and so probably improves our performance. I have learned from this to take a few minutes to myself to focus my thoughts before meeting classes on campus. I clear my desk and my mind and try to envision the flow I want to establish during class. Before I taught at prison I wrongly assumed that because I knew the material I could simply walk into class and start teaching. Prison has taught me the necessity of a transition from the outside world to the classroom. It is not enough to know the material; it is necessary to empathize with both the material and the students.

I have outlined in the preceding pages some of the differences between college in prison and “in the street.” I have attempted to show how we might apply some of the lessons from prison to the traditional college environment. Some aspects of college in prison obviously can not be duplicated. For example, most of my students in prison are mature men, thirty to fifty years old, whose life experiences far surpass that of their nineteen or twenty year old counterparts in traditional environments. Moreover, their experiences have made them extraordinarily receptive to the material I teach. Men who have gone to the wall are more inclined to take seriously the travails of *Candide* or the Socratic admonition that the only life worth living is the self-examined life. Prisoners are not fools. Almost instinctively they reject the superficial and the pretentious. They abhor fluff. They want courses that address the great issues in life. Some of our problems on traditional campuses stem from our tendency to parade fluff as wisdom. Courses bearing such lofty titles as “The Principles of Salesmanship” or “The Social History of Sports and Recreation” are not, in the final analysis, going to help students confront life. We should recall the intent and purpose, historically, of the liberal arts. “We call those studies liberal which are worthy of a free man,” wrote the Renaissance humanist Pietro Vergerio, “those studies by which we attain and practice virtue and wisdom.” Students in prison have come to value

freedom. They understand that freedom implies choice, and they appreciate the value of the humanities in preparing them to make responsible choices. We need to restore this perspective to traditional campuses. "What I like best," Voltaire once wrote, "is to plant, sow, build, and above all to be free." Students in prison see the beauty in this. If we can apply a little bit of the prison to "the street," then maybe we can get our traditional students to see it as well.