

prison english news

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The Prison English program at the Arizona State University Department of English is entering its fourth academic year. In August 2010, students began online internships in which they coached writing for maximum-security inmates at the Penitentiary of New Mexico. In January 2011, the first teaching interns from the ASU English department arrived at Florence State Prison in Arizona to teach classes at the North Unit minimum-security yard.

We begin the 2013-2014 academic year having built a solid continuing program that takes ASU students, faculty, and staff to a difficult frontier in American education. Prison education is what happens when our educational systems fail. In this program we employ a variety of university-developed English skills—critical analysis, creative writing, literature and drama, linguistics, and teaching English as a second language—to provide education where it is most needed.



Joe Lockard, faculty member responsible for the Prison English program, meets with Michelle Ribeiro, Acting Education Director at the Penitentiary of New Mexico, to plan future work.

In the spring 2013 semester, twenty-one ASU graduate and undergraduate interns gained exposure to the issues and difficulties of prisons and prison education. Departing interns frequently state that the Prison English program has provided one of their most memorable educational experiences. Whatever their future interaction with the prison system, it is an experience that will continue to shape the social consciences and work lives of our interns. Those who continue as teachers will become better teachers for having worked “inside the wire” and learning first-hand where poor or non-existent education can lead.

During the past several years, we have been fortunate to benefit from support by those who wanted to see this program succeed. These include the Arizona Department of Corrections, the New Mexico Corrections Department, and the administration of the ASU Department of English. Prison education programming by community volunteers can function only on a foundation of cooperation with corrections departments.

As this program has advanced, a growing body of friends, interested colleagues, and former interns has given us a reason to produce a newsletter. We are part of a spreading movement of prison-university cooperative programs throughout the United States that seek to provide inmates with both non-credit and academic credit-bearing post-secondary educational opportunities. Talking about our teaching is an essential element for encouraging others at colleges, universities, and other institutions to take up the work of realizing a universal human right to education. Go teach in prisons—do it now.

—JOE LOCKARD

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Penitentiary of New Mexico

Teaching Portfolio Extracts:

Letters from Interns to Inmates

These are selections from final letters that English 484 undergraduate interns write to inmates in New Mexico after a semester in which the interns provide long-distance writing coaching. For security reasons, interns employ pseudonyms.

Before becoming an intern for The PEN Project, I wanted to believe that I understood the US prison system and its myriad flaws... I read. Scanned the news. Watched documentaries. Did my research. I thought being theoretically informed was good enough. I was arrogant. I thought I knew what it meant to live caged. How could I be so terribly, terribly wrong?

—VESPER

All I knew about prison life, or prisoners, came from television shows like *Locked Up* or movies like *American History X*... However these were only abstractions in my head, there was no flesh and bone to those beliefs. No face to the individuals who experience those hardships on a daily basis. The PEN Project changed all of that for me. It gave me names, histories, and faces to connect the dots with. It gave me reality in all its ugliness and beauty. I never would have guessed at the impact this project would have on me.

—GONZO

I have lived a very sheltered life and knew next to nothing about prison life before I started this program. I know enough that it is not something that I ever want to experience but I am grateful for the glimpse that I have had. I wish more of us could have this glimpse. I think we as a nation would be a little slower to vote for legislation that makes prison life even worse than it already is. I think that if people could see the humility and passion and humanity in your writing they wouldn't be so quick to write off every one out of thirty-five adults in our country.

—CLAY

I started as an intern with this project last spring, not entirely sure how I could be of any help to anyone when I couldn't even write a story that I was proud of. But I read your poetry, your fiction, and your non-fiction and was inspired. I was revitalized in a way that I hadn't ever expected in my wildest of dreams. To be honest, the internship became something that I looked forward to more than any of my other courses and more than my job. I dropped whatever I was doing whenever I saw new cycles of work come through. I spent hours combing through poetry just to find something I enjoyed and thought you might enjoy, too. Never in my life have I read so many great poems.

—THEO

This experience was one of the best ones that I have had in my life. I am so passionate about the issues surrounding the prison system, especially since I have had close relatives in prison for the last fourteen years. Aside from exchanging letters and watching documentaries, I never really knew what went on. This PEN project has opened up a channel for the voices of inmates who are striving to make the best of their second chance and to find happiness. Some people lose hope when they make mistakes or strike out, but you all were eager to learn more and to share more. I just wish the masses of the world can see this for themselves and read the beautiful work. This semester, I have read some of the best poetry that I have ever read in my life. Sadly, if I told someone where it came from, they probably would not believe me. But it is something that I take pride in; I will never forget this experience.

—CAPTAIN

Calculating Impact: doing the numbers

- Over the last four semesters, NMCD inmates have submitted some **482 essays, short stories, and poems** for critical response from ASU interns.
- A portfolio of writing by NMCD inmates, together with ASU-generated critical responses, averages **715 single-spaced pages** per semester. In the recently-completed Spring 2013 semester, the portfolio reached **1,000 single-spaced pages**.
- Depending on number of interns and assuming average hourly teaching wages, NMCD receives program **savings of \$27,000-40,500** per semester.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Florence State Prison

Teaching Portfolio Extracts: *Intern Reflections*

These extracts are from portfolios written by English 584 interns who teach at the North Unit of Florence State Prison.



Every Friday morning during the semester, English 584 interns meet with their supervisor, Prof. Joe Lockard, in the Florence State Prison parking lot before they begin teaching. Interns for Fall 2012 – Beverly Gross, Sarah Glady and Hannah Way (left to right).

...[T]hese discussions were some of my favorites throughout the course, in part because it gave the men a different kind of confidence compared to writing and sharing their own work; it seemed to bring them into a literary tradition much older than themselves, and showed them they could participate with Yeats and Plath. Now whenever I approach Berryman, I am reminded of when we read 'Dream Song 1' as a class: it was in the packet so the men had already read it and were prepared for class. I read the poem out loud and the first response was a sigh of relief from the youngest fellow in the group; he thought somehow he'd read the words on the page wrong. I then asked them what they thought the poem was about. The response to that was confusion, that they did not like the poem and didn't understand it. After I asked if we could find places, language or ideas we did understand, the conversation took off, showing the men did understand why someone might invert syntax as Berryman does, that the poem was about how life is hard.

...[H]earing some of the men discuss their incarceration histories, I was reminded how deep many are in a life of crime and an upcoming release from Florence might really just be a brief stay outside the razor wire before coming back to what is more of a home. Can literature change lives? Absolutely and unconditionally: yes. For one young man in our group, his dedication to his writing will be the difference in how long he stays alive after his release.

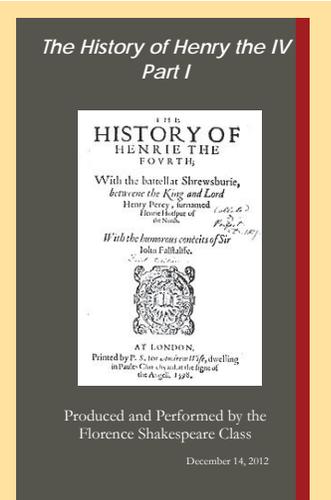
But literature changes us more often in small, nearly immeasurable ways – finally dealing with old memories kept forcibly dormant, knowing someone else was feeling sorrow two hundred years ago the way you do today, learning a new word or phrase or an image that feels beautiful when made audible and the speech echoes within the mouth and the mind.

—CHRISTINE HOLM, creative writing teacher, Spring 2013

[While teaching at Florence] I was simultaneously teaching two sections of English 102 at ASU... So many of the students in this course were putting very little into their academic experience and it was clear that their priority was partying on the weekends. Few did their homework even when the expectations and consequences were clear. This was very frustrating and disheartening for me as a lover of learning and as a teacher. I had always thought teaching at the college level was what I wanted to do, but working with these eighteen year-olds who treated the classroom like it was a waste of time and beneath them made me question my relationship to teaching... Which brings me to how strikingly different my experience was in Florence... [The men there] were the most dedicated, passionate and considerate students I have ever taught... [they] treated the course like learning and being there was a privilege.

—RACHEL GOLDMAN, creative writing teacher, Spring 2013

ASU's Prison English program has been teaching Shakespeare since its inception. Teaching interns at Florence State Prison introduce Shakespeare's drama and poetry, and conclude each semester with a finale performance or reading by students. These performances have included selections from *The Merchant of Venice*, *Timon of Athens*, *Henry the Fourth Part 1*, and more. The accompanying image is the finale performance program from the Fall 2012 Shakespeare course.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Penitentiary of New Mexico

Behind Bars in New Mexico

Behind prison bars stand the lowly and invisible, men and women often stripped of their rights and their voices, but not their humanity. In each of us lies the capacity to imagine and create, along with the need to tell our stories, to connect with others, to heal.

This belief is the core of the Pen Project. English 484: Pen Project interns have been teaching and responding to creative writing from mainly maximum-security inmates at the Penitentiary of New Mexico (PNM) in Santa Fe.

Last winter the PEN Project internship's current instructor, Dr. Cornelia "Corri" Wells, and I drove to New Mexico. Two opportunities awaited us: an English Composition conference hosted by Cengage Learning in Albuquerque, and the chance to teach an in-person writing workshop at the PNM. The workshop was arranged by Michelle Ribeiro, education director of PNM, and co-founder of the Pen Project internship with Dr. Joe Lockard from ASU.

We arrived at the prison with eight large boxes of books, significantly increasing the size of PNM's modest library. Due to the efforts of Jeanne Flaaen, an English teacher at Liberty High School and mother of former Pen Project intern Erin Flaaen, nearly half of the books were donated by teachers from high schools in the Peoria Unified School District. The rest were contributed by ASU English faculty and students.

Corri and I taught 25 minimum-security inmates. Apart from the bright orange jumpsuits that inspired one inmate to describe the class as a pumpkin patch, nothing differentiates these men from ordinary students.

Our workshop focused on empathy and imagery. A Jewish aphorism asks, "What is truer than the truth? Answer: the story." Stories, real or fiction, offer another portrayal of human experience. They invite empathy by asking us to imagine life through another's eyes.

The class exercised empathy and imagery by writing in first-person from another's perspective and experiences. This imaginary other could be historical,

fictitious, famous, common, male, female, dead, alive, animal, person, or object. Everyone, including PNM educators, shared their work with heartfelt honesty; there were even tearful moments among half the participants. I felt invigorated by the intelligence and creativity that permeated the room. Whatever their skill level, these were serious, talented writers.



Tina Cai. Photo by Andy DeLisle.

Group education is rare for the inmates. In this mostly maximum-security facility, AmeriCorps volunteers teach GED courses to inmates one-on-one through the cracks of closed doors. Their only other education is long-distance online creative writing coaching with Pen Project interns at ASU, the only program of its kind in the nation.

Novelist and human rights activist Salman Rushdie describes humans as storytelling animals. Whether from behind bars or a dorm room, a retirement home or a playground, a manor or a slum, we each have a story to tell. Valuing these stories is the first step toward valuing others and ourselves.

—TINA CAI

Tina Cai is a senior English major who has interned with both English 484: Pen Project and English 584: Florence State Prison. She is currently studying in China on a Fulbright-Hays scholarship. In 2012 she visited and taught at the Penitentiary of New Mexico.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Florence State Prison

Prison Fictions

Since last fall, I've been teaching fiction to prisoners in Florence, Arizona. It began as a volunteer side job through Joe Lockard's excellent prison teaching internship, and now it's an essential part of my week. Friday mornings start with the 63-plus mile drive across Phoenix, past Apache Junction, and into the desert. I try to arrive early to buy vending machine coffee in the visitors' room where our workshop used to meet. Usually I'm nervous before class—but not because they're prisoners, and not even because they're sex offenders (a detail I learned roughly a week before my first session), but because I'm never sure if my lesson can encompass all their interests and needs. I try.

Marcus writes a fantasy trilogy about an ancient fighter named O.M.A. (One Man Army). Bobby's poem "The Birth of Hope" describes an inmate's desire for a rainbow, the only lover who dares visit him in prison. Notso, initially the most confrontational—writing a monologue from my point-of-view for our first assignment—has become my biggest supporter, submitting an encyclopedic history of elderly war veterans on a park bench remembering. Notso's last name is Smart so he calls himself "Notso" and asks that we do the same: Notso Smart.

Then there's Wesley, missing his front teeth, who told me once that everyone appears to be friends in workshop but on the yard are only acquaintances. His first submission described a beaming couple planning their wedding while on a Caribbean vacation. In detail he described the succulent jerk chicken they ate, how the sand gloriously rubbed their feet, where they planned to snorkel the next day. I realized Wes was just writing to take a vacation. He didn't care when we demanded he add tension and conflict; the piece had already served its purpose for him. He wanted to get away.

They write for different reasons but mostly because they have time. Some are serving sentences extending far beyond life. "I can finish a novel in the eleven-and-a-half years I have left," D said. He submits a new chapter almost every week.

They ask for news of the outside world—"Go to a baseball game for me," they say at the end of class. They're constantly replaying memories in their workshop stories, with an attention to detail that sometimes surprises. They remember how meals taste, what the light looks like at



In fiction, as in life, everything is not always as it seems. Corey Campbell poses by the La Brea Tar Pits in Los Angeles, CA.

certain times of day, the names of their childhood streets. They write pieces for their children and lately, meditations on living in prison and guesses about the black hole of life beyond.

I'm not going to condone the horrible acts that landed the students in Florence, the mistakes they'll never be able to make right. (I'm not going to look them up either.) I am grateful, however, that these people in orange t-shirts who show up for class each Friday morning are teaching me what stories can mean to someone.

—COREY CAMPBELL

Corey Campbell is Program Manager for the ASU Creative Writing Program. She is also a fiction writer with an MFA from the Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College and a BFA in Film Production from NYU.

Note: a slightly altered version of this article first appeared in *Accents on English: Newsletter of the Department of English at Arizona State University* 16:3 (Spring 2013). english.clas.asu.edu/accents2013

CROSS-CONNECTIONS

History, Reach, and Depth of ASU English Prison Work

Musing on Our Beginnings

Editor's Note: Before the present Prison English program took form, other Department of English faculty, staff, and students were involved in the Prison Library and Education Project. Following is a condensed history of that outreach.

In 2004, I began collecting and delivering donated texts to Arizona prisons. From 2005 to 2010, Outreach Coordinator Kristen LaRue, Regents' Professor Elly van Gelderen, and several undergraduate interns—one a former inmate himself—joined me in gathering and distributing tens of thousands of additional texts to the libraries of five men's prisons in Arizona, a women's prison in Tennessee, and the Maricopa County Sheriff's library. In addition, I coordinated lectures and offered creative writing courses at two Arizona men's facilities.



Regents' Professor Elly van Gelderen, a passionate advocate for human rights, has been active in prison outreach at ASU since 2005.



Elizabeth McNeil

In 2004-06, then ASU English Faculty Associate John Birk ran a lecture and creative writing program at another Arizona correctional center. Dr. Birk published anthologies of inmate writing, with the help of Kristen LaRue. He and I later contributed to *Desert Pawns: Breaking the Cycle of Reincarceration* (2010), a teaching text by Gerard LeMoine (with Bob Kaplan), the prison educator responsible for bringing in Dr. Birk to offer his very successful program.

—ELIZABETH McNEIL

Elizabeth McNeil is former Director of Undergraduate Academic Services in the Department of English. She is now an Instructor in the School of Letters and Sciences, ASU Downtown campus. Her most recent book is Sapphire's Literary Breakthrough: Erotic Literacies, Feminist Pedagogies, Environmental Justice Perspectives (Palgrave/Macmillan 2012), co-edited with Neal A. Lester, Doveanna S. Fulton, and Lynette D. Myles.



Sofya Tarabrina and Joe Lockard

Hosting a Russian Fulbright Scholar

Sofya Tarabrina, an English professor at the Academy of the Federal Penal Service of Russia, spent the 2012-2013 academic year as a visiting Fulbright scholar at the Arizona State University Department of English. Her research centered on preparing courses on "The US Penitentiary System" and "Correctional Programming for Inmates in Russia and the US." She also studied methods of teaching English as a second language. Prof. Tarabrina selected the ASU English department to spend her Fulbright year due to the presence of the Prison English program.

CROSS-CONNECTIONS

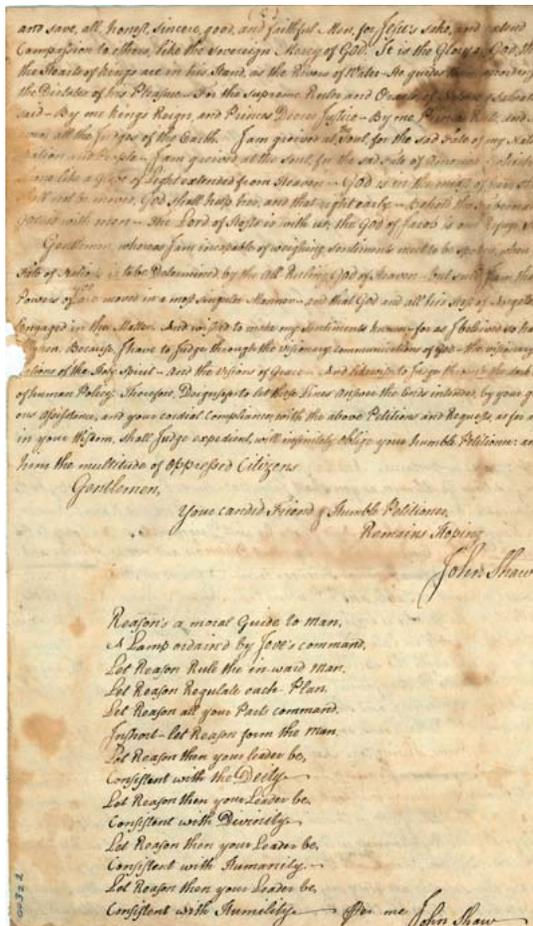
Discovering an Early American Prison Narrative

I discovered probably the lengthiest known early American prison narrative because of a cataloging error. I was sitting in the Filson Society archives in Louisville, Kentucky, where I read a cataloging note that this handwritten manuscript from the late eighteenth century was by an imprisoned African American slave. An unknown African American text from this date would be a rare and major find, so I asked to examine the manuscript.

A few minutes into reading the manuscript's fine hand and eccentric spelling, I realized that this did not concern enslavement and was not by an African American writer. The writer was a querulous, highly argumentative older white man named John Shaw. He was a devout Presbyterian, one of many who settled in Kentucky in the late eighteenth century.

According to the manuscript, a series of nine long letters assembled in 1794, Shaw had been sitting in jail for seven years. Shaw never mentions why he was imprisoned other than to repeat that it was unjust. The reason was probably a civil claim for debt, not a criminal case.

The conditions of Shaw's imprisonment were certainly crude and very difficult, likely little different from a log-built slave pen. The Kentucky state prison at Frankfort opened for its first inmates only in 1800. These conditions drove Shaw, already a difficult personality, into deep and vociferous bitterness. He wrote of himself that he had "no possessions but rages." He styled himself "American preacher" on the title page and his religious tirades fill the following pages.



John Shaw. Letter 1, manuscript page 5. The Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky (reprinted by courtesy of the Filson Historical Society).

When I worked to transcribe and analyze this text, I was staying at a small apartment in Beijing's Haidian district, where my partner and I were awaiting the birth of our child. Sitting at this far remove in time and space, I wondered what could connect us to such a distant character? There was no attractive feature in the personality that emerged from these letters containing grandiose religious prophecies and appeals. Shaw wrote nothing of other prison inmates; his only concern was himself. He wanted recognition as a

religious prophet and these letters were his claim on that status. In writing about John Shaw, was I doing him the favor for which he hoped in writing these attention-seeking letters?

Gradually, after sinking into the text, I realized that Shaw was writing a "vindication narrative." He knew that he had few or no future prospects: there would be no redemption. Surviving seven winters in an unheated jail through very cold Kentucky winters was an unexpected accomplishment of itself. This autobiographical manuscript and its sentiments were his rationale for living. The society he knew had abandoned him. Writing was all he had left. Beyond this manuscript, there are no known historical traces of John Shaw.

Shaw's manuscript encapsulates a question that gets raised often when we read and teach prison literature: how do we discuss and understand writers who may have histories with which it is difficult to sympathize? Some readers ignore those personal histories while other readers never see beyond social stigmatism and moral condemnation. The real issues in the John Shaw manuscript and other prison literature are no different from those we encounter with any literature: what can we learn by digging deep into the text?

—JOE LOCKARD

For further background, see Lockard, "No Possessions but Rages": Vindication, Salvation, and Prison Letters in Early Kentucky," *Biography* 35:4 (Fall 2012): 610-627.



Education—a Basic Human “Write”

The night before I left for my first trip to the Penitentiary of New Mexico (PNM) I was having dinner with my husband and daughter at Chili's in Gilbert, Arizona. My daughter inquired, “So how do you feel?” I replied, “I am looking forward to going to prison.” The people at the table behind us looked back at me, and my teenage daughter's face moved from its typical pale shade to a deep hue of rouge. She gasped, “Moottherrrr...”



Sherry Rankins-Robertson

poetry, short stories, letters to families, narrative/memoirs, and essays. Our goal was, as it is in any college writing classroom, to instill a sense of confidence and self-awareness in writers so they are able to develop clearer, more concise writing. We wanted to help the writers see that writing could change the world around them and transform their self-perceptions and views.

From the internship class I taught grew the student organization, Prison Education Awareness Club (PEAC), and the annual prison conference. Joe and I have spoken at national conferences and written articles to prompt others in higher education to join the growing movement to provide quality education to inmates.

Education is a basic human “write.” Education should not be limited only to those who can afford it. Education changes not only an individual's mindset, but also it provides options and avenues for a different kind of living. If every college and university faculty member made a commitment to prison-education partnerships, then perhaps the U.S. would not have the highest incarceration rates in the world.

—SHERRY RANKINS-ROBERTSON

Sherry Rankins-Robertson, co-founder of ASU's Prison English program, is today Director of Composition and Assistant Professor of Rhetoric and Writing at University of Arkansas at Little Rock. She continues to teach in prisons, and she is currently developing a writing program in a women's prison just outside of her hometown of Little Rock.

More about ongoing work at the Penitentiary of New Mexico: inside on pages 2 and 4.

The thrill I felt that night has only grown within me after three years of working as a prison educator. In 2010, I began my work as the co-founder of the present Prison English project at Arizona State University when Joe Lockard and I designed a program that provided feedback to maximum-security writers. Alongside Michelle Ribeiro, acting director of education at PNM, we aimed to provide educational opportunities to individuals who would not otherwise have an option to participate in workshops or classes.

Throughout the first academic year, we developed the infrastructure and implemented a program that involved undergraduate university writing interns who were exposed to theories on facilitative feedback. Interns provided response via distance education to writers who submitted