

prison english news

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Prison education happens in an environment that is often unstable, interrupted, and strewn with unforeseen difficulties. The 2013-2014 academic year for Prison English was unsteady but ultimately successful. We were able to deliver high-quality, non-credit educational programming despite delays and one particularly traumatic disruption.

Although attacks against prison teachers are exceedingly rare, in February a Department of Corrections teacher at Eyman State Prison suffered a violent attack. Education programming was suspended while new security procedures were implemented and self-defense training arranged for teachers. We have always paid close attention to security issues and this event re-emphasized its importance.

During this past year we have expanded our teaching work to include Eyman State Prison, as well as Florence State Prison where we have worked since Fall 2009. Just as important, the range of courses we offer continues to expand. We are no longer strictly "Prison English." We added very popular and successful courses in drama and Chinese, for example, and continue to increase the variety of course offerings. This involves collaboration with other ASU units and schools.

In Fall 2014 we will be inaugurating new courses at Eyman's Browning Unit, a supermax facility where inmates are celled 23 hours a day and educational opportunities are very limited. We have supported and worked with a student-led initiative from the School of Life Sciences to teach a year-long introductory biology class. A group of eight students, mostly PhD students, are developing a biology curriculum adapted to supermax security conditions.

At the same time, we are repatriating English 484: Pen Project to Arizona after a years-long and highly successful run at primarily supermax units of the Penitentiary of New Mexico. This long-distance writing coaching course, organized and taught by Dr. Corri Wells, will operate in the Browning Unit too. We will be able to offer a balance of humanities and science education within this facility.

ASU's School of Historical, Philosophical and Religious Studies will be joining these efforts in Fall 2014. Two of its graduate students will offer an Introduction to Philosophy course at Eyman State Prison's Cook Unit, a medium-security site. The ASU Herberger Institute's School of Theater and Film will be sponsoring another drama workshop during the Fall semester. What began as an English department initiative has spread across the university.

Our teachers this past year have done their work with excellence despite the difficulties they faced. In one class, for instance, two-thirds of the students were transferred off the yard in mid-course. For a combination of reasons, a couple classes had severely reduced numbers after promising beginnings. Teaching in prisons fosters adaptation and emphasizes the value of basic classroom skills with small groups.

I am grateful to work alongside and learn from teachers who are so talented, well-organized, passionate, and committed.

—JOE LOCKARD



Spring 2014 Prison English teachers

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IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Eyman State Prison

Collective Crossroads Project: "Grounded: It's Breathtaking"

One of the highlights of this past year was the Collective Crossroads project at Eyman State Prison. Together with 18 Cook Unit inmates, MFA candidate Julie Rada organized and produced an original play titled "Grounded: It's Breathtaking." They performed it in April to acclaim from inmates, staff, and a small group of ASU observers. Below are extracts from her writing about this collaborative process.

I asked if we might put our chairs in a circle so that we could all see each other. Once we accomplished this, I stated why I had done so, noting that I hoped to create a lateral community of learners in which no one particular person's voice had unequal weight. I voiced my contention that part of an artist's work is in making the invisible visible, or in creating space to see anew. We talked about architecture and the standard layout of classrooms, and how this reinforced a certain dynamic between "teacher" and "student" that would not benefit the artistic work. I proposed that we were in a room of experts and that I consider them my teachers. At that time, verbalizing this relationship of them as my teachers and of all of us on a journey of co-learning was more about naming my intentions. Now though, I see that this has manifested in our work throughout the "Collective Crossroads" project.

Also on the first day, I spoke candidly about my awareness of my "outsider" status. This was my strategy in earning their trust: not negating or sugarcoating the fact of their imprisonment, but instead speaking about it openly when necessary. In spite of incarceration as a shared experience for the workshop participants, I do not presume that all of them feel the same away about being in prison, or that they universally crave freedom. I do my best not to project onto them any of my own ideas about what their experiences may be like or assume that they feel homogenously about anything.

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Gender construction is not at all what one might expect it would be at Cook Unit. The news and the media portray prison as a space of hypermasculinity where men use violence and sex to get what they want rather than relying of communication and emotional intelligence; this image is particularly true of those convicted of sex offenses. Prior to going to Eyman, I was anxious about what I could and should wear, both to command respect as a woman, as well as to avoid making myself vulnerable to disrespect or objectification. I never, for an instance, felt a twinge of discomfort or uneasiness about how I presented myself. The men have respected me based on my intelligence and willingness to work with them. I have no idea what



Julie Rada

happens, if anything, inside their minds in regard to me; it is neither important, nor any of my business. Still, externally they have demonstrated nothing beyond respect for me as a human being, and much more so than, say, undergraduates on Mill Avenue in Tempe. When I tell people I work in a prison, many people assume that I work in a women's prison, whether or not I indicate as much. This tells me more about how we perceive gender roles in general: who we think is violent, who we think is safer, who we think is criminal, and who we think are more receptive to art.

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They are generally emotionally authentic, and are not scorned for being so. In at least four or five workshop sessions, men have cried and have not tried to hide it. I have witnessed their distaste for homophobia. Specifically, early on a man mentioned that he had danced ballet as a young person and instead of being teased by the other workshop participants, they showed interest and support. The men expressed anger at Arizona politicians when Senate Bill 1062, the proposed

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legislation that would allow for legal discrimination of GLBTQ persons by Arizona businesses, was in the news. I read one man's writing in which he described how, since being incarcerated, his parents had divorced and his mother was now with a woman. The man who wrote this is LDS/Mormon and demonstrated no conflict in his faith. Another man wrote about how a gang with anti-gay sentiments had taken over the yard some time back and how the rest of the men worked together to have the members of this gang transferred.

Over the past several months, I hope I have demonstrated to the men my dedication to our work together. They have responded to me with their trust and an acknowledgment that I am doing my best to keep my word to them, to show up, and to listen. They have verbally expressed their trust in me as an artist, and as a theatre director, and have invited my decision-making and feedback in regard to our performance work. I have established that I do not want to wield authority over them, but to be with them in this artistic process, creating alongside them as artists. Additionally, while I do not know the full extent to which they trust one another, I have watched throughout the workshop as men who did not know each other have become friends, demonstrating love and respect to each other, collaborating across race or age distinctions, and mingling outside of their social groups.

I was nervous when I shared the script. After they had been generating material and performing for me, I brought in a product of my work for them to scrutinize. I recognized that I possessed the critical distance necessary to cut, shape, and collate their excellent ideas. I also felt the least qualified of anyone in the room to be writing words from the men to perform, since I have the least experience with incarceration. I was anxious that I had been insensitive, focusing too much on offensive or painful things, and not enough on joy. I felt the tension between not wanting the sum total of the script to dwell on the fact of their imprisonment, but also not wanting to gloss over the reality of their experience. There were words they had written which I necessarily had to take out of context, such as "I am failure," which I feared would make them feel reduced or vulnerable. When we first read through the script, however, as I sweated from nerves, many of the men cried, expressing appreciation for my willingness to see them as they are.

On March 14, 2014, I left a particularly intense session with the men at the prison. What struck me was how that day one of the men disclosed that he was incarcerated for murder and that he was "guilty as sin." From there, I drove for an hour to a rehearsal in which I was working with

someone who witnessed his father murdered in a home invasion. In the span of an hour, I was present with two different people whom I respect and feel affection, who have been on one side or the other of a horrible crime. As I traveled across the desert and back into the city, my mind could not intellectually process or rationalize what I was supposed to think about this juxtaposition.

I feel isolated in this work. The workshop itself happens beyond gates and locked doors, over sixty miles from my community. When I talk about the project with colleagues, I wonder if the people with whom I speak consider me deluded, since I am inspired by the men at the prison, but the perception of criminals as dangerous and manipulative is so prevalent. On multiple occasions, I have had to defend my choice for using my skills on these "undeserving" others. I am frustrated that some of the most meaningful conversations that occur in my week happen in a room at Cook Unit, and yet I cannot capture these moments in any way. These experiences are difficult to translate and incommunicability pervades this work, sometimes even in myself. I spend time every week with people society describes as murderers, rapists, and child molesters. And they surprise me, by the depth of their humanity: not as prisoners but as human beings. My heart feels love for these men and my brain cannot always keep up. But if the problems of uncertainty and complexity are at the root of prison-based theatre, then I must acknowledge that the binary between heart and head is imagined and, inside me, I embody the very uncertainty and complexity of the Collective Crossroads project. I do not have answers, only more questions.

—JULIE RADA

Prison English 2013-2014: teachers and courses

Tina Cai	Chinese/Shakespeare
Cory Campbell	Creative writing
Dana Diehl	Creative writing
Rachel Goldman	Creative writing
Elly van Gelderen	Linguistics
Christine Holm	Poetry
Joe Lockard	Poetry
Kimberley Moran	Shakespeare
Julie Rada	Drama / Shakespeare
Sara Rocchio	Shakespeare
Sara Snyder	English as a Second Language
Deanna Stover	English as a Second Language

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Eyman State Prison

Collective Crossroads Project:

An Audience Perspective

One of the small group of outside observers allowed to see the Collective Crossroads production was associate professor Rachel Bowditch from the ASU Herberger Institute's School of Theatre and Film; her comments on the performance are here.

It is hard to describe the amazing performance directed by Julie Rada at Eyman prison. Seeing these men be so vulnerable, poetic, and human was profoundly moving. Many of those present, including myself, were in tears at the end. Some of these men will never leave prison and have been there for 20 years. For them, this was momentary freedom—to soar through metaphor, poetry, and performance.

Some images that remain: a flock of men in orange transforming into a phoenix in the prison courtyard while another danced ballet around them; one man drawing an elaborate phoenix on the wall with charcoal, the intimate sharing of dreams, hopes, fears, and nightmares; one man crying and another giving him a huge bear hug and kiss; tattoos covered in glitter and feathers; the community that was created through this process; the safe space of creativity and freedom Julie provided for these men; the acknowledgement of how



Rachel Bowditch

transformative this process has been for them. All of the men are there for a reason: for a violent sex crime they committed. All of them are still human and have the possibility for healing and transformation—performance and art can help in this process, all of them

acknowledged that. When asked what they wanted us to leave with, they said, “Don’t take the sunrise and sunset for granted...or when you walk through the grass barefoot, don’t take that for granted...Freedom is the freedom to choose.” To be honest, at first I was nervous about going into a medium security unit that required security clearance and checkpoints with a room full of sex offenders, but by the end, through this shared experience, I felt comfortable giving many of them a hug. The last image was all of them saying a sentence about hope, dreams, or freedom as they walked towards the window that looked out onto the prison yard, the barbed wire fence, and freedom beyond. Everyone single one of them had tears in their eyes. As Bonnie, Stephanie, and I left the prison, the sky felt more expansive and the sunset more intense. This was powerful, powerful work. Wow, just wow.

—RACHEL BOWDITCH

New Biology Course at Eyman State Prison

Cooperation between ASU and the Arizona Department of Corrections is expanding in the upcoming 2014-2015 academic year. That expansion is concentrated on Eyman State Prison in Florence. One new educational offering will be a biology course.

Anika Larsen, a biology major who interned in English 484: Pen Project, is organizing a group of eight graduate and advanced undergraduate students for a Biology 584 teaching internship. The group will teach a year-long weekly class in biology at a pre-GED level. The biology teaching group is developing its curriculum over the summer under the sponsorship of Prof. Tsafir Mor of ASU’s biology department. Prof. Joe Lockard will provide field supervision.

Science education in prisons is very rare. This initiative is even more unusual because the course will be taught in a supermax facility, the Browning Unit of Eyman State Prison. Teaching conditions are difficult; all inmate students arrive at class in restraints and spend class-time in individual steel cages.

Cooperation has been made possible by the warden, deputy wardens, and education officers of Eyman State Prison, especially Roberta Norales, and in the ADC central office by Gail Rittenhouse, director of social services; Mark Jones, education administrator; and Tim Lawrence, regional education supervisor.

—THE EDITORS

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Eyman State Prison

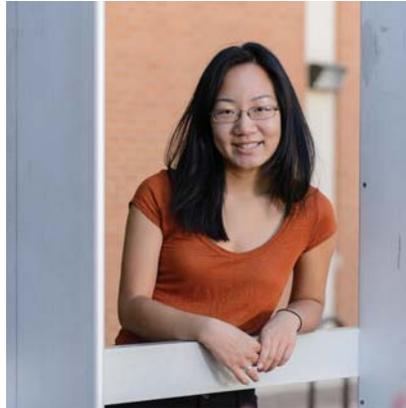
My Process: *Teaching Chinese in Prison*

In the spring semester, Tina Cai—an Honors College double major in English and Chinese—taught Chinese at Eyman State Prison. The Chinese-language course that she introduced will continue this fall with two new teachers.

What is the purpose of teaching Chinese in prison? As the daughter of Chinese immigrants, I learned Chinese the easy way. The language and culture were a natural part of my upbringing, and my decision to formally study Chinese at the university was both personally and professionally motivated. However, I quickly discovered that few of my own rationales for studying Chinese applied to my students at Eyman State Prison. For most, their desire to study the language and culture of China represents an intellectual curiosity. Many are serving long sentences and will never make their way to China.

The sheer difficulty of learning Chinese represents an intellectual challenge that capable students rarely encounter in prison classrooms. Inmate students take appreciable pride in even small hints of progress no matter their language level, whether they have mastered a vocabulary word or grammatical structure, written a complex character, or carried a simple dialogue with a classmate.

I began with little things. From my previous teaching experience at Florence State Prison, I noticed students felt considerable pride in taking a class offered by Arizona State University. For the class at Eyman, I brought in red (a lucky color in Chinese culture) folders affixed with official-looking ASU seals. I promised to teach the course at a level comparable to that of a university-level course, at least to the extent possible within a prison environment. My parents helped me to choose Chinese surnames and given names based on characteristics and values of each student's choice, and I made nametags and labels proudly displaying their new Chinese identities. In addition to establishing an individual



Tina Cai. Photo by Andy DeLisle.

connection between the students and the language, I hoped these small details would allow them to feel a sense of personal validation as serious and worthy students of Chinese.

It is ironic that teaching in a prison affords me a level of freedom that is seldom found in classrooms on the outside. There are hardly any stipulations regarding the content or structure of the course, and there is no standardized exam that will quantitatively measure my students' competency or my own. Instead, I am at complete liberty to create and change the course in order to best meet my students' needs and my own teaching goals. While this freedom is a blessing, it also necessitates the development of a clear conceptual framework for the course before it can even be executed. My first challenge was to determine my teaching objectives and design a suitable curriculum.

At the beginning of the semester, I struggled to find a balance between the linguistic and cultural components of the class. I felt that an emphasis on China's culture—both ancient and modern—would better suit the nature of the course. Over time, I shifted the class content toward that of a university-level

introductory Chinese class, focusing more on the language than on the culture. As the class went on, I found the students wanted to create complete sentences and read entire texts. They enjoyed producing tangible work—even the simple act of tracing out a character gave them a sense of satisfaction.

In class, as we discuss the cultural values embedded in the language, the students are exposed to new ideas and ways of thinking. I encourage their questions about my own relationship to the language, how I've tried to navigate the borders of Chinese and American identity, and my interpretations of historical and contemporary events in China, filtered through my lens as a daughter of Chinese immigrants. This has become an important part of my pedagogy. The study of Chinese takes on meaning when understood within the context of individual lives. However, the truth is that the early stages of Chinese language learning involve hours and hours of memorization and repetition, and not all of these exercises offer eye-opening insights into Chinese culture.

When asked to elaborate on the personal and intellectual rewards of learning Chinese, my students offered variations on a theme: the sense of achievement derived from overcoming intellectual obstacles. One student wrote: "This seemed like an impossible task for me at the beginning. Seeing that I can actually read, write, and speak some Chinese at this point has instilled greater confidence in me and has inspired me to press on." Another responded: "What started as gibberish and alien-sounding noise has become a comprehensible language. Something that is within reach. For me, personally, I am taking steps toward actualizing my dreams." And another summed it all up: "Put simply, knowing I can learn it!"

—TINA CAI



Growth in Prison Teaching Internships

Fall 2011-Fall 2014

Prison education internships have grown from a handful of students in 2010 to dozens each semester. These graduate and undergraduate students teach in different modes: on-the-ground and online. ASU faculty volunteers join and teach together with students.

