Radical Conversations:

Part One—Social-Constructivist Methods in the ABE Classroom

Bill Muth

Virginia Commonwealth University

Bill Muth, Ph.D.
4802 Sligo Lane
Annandale, Va 22003
(804) 828-8768
wrmuth@vcu.edu

Bio:

Dr. Bill Muth is an Assistant Professor of Adult and Adolescent Literacy at Virginia Commonwealth University. From 1980-2005 he worked for the Federal Bureau of Prisons as a reading teacher, ABE Coordinator, school principal, and education administrator.

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Abstract

For the past 40 years adult learning theory has stressed the need for adults to share in the planning of their own learning and socially construct new knowledge by building on their background knowledge and life experiences. Despite growing acceptance of social-constructivist pedagogies in community-based literacy programs and even corporate settings, much literacy instruction in U.S. prisons remains individualized, and prison classrooms are not perceived as safe places for conversations about life experiences and personal literacy needs. This two-part report explores reasons for this silencing and the potential for change. In Part One, the case for social-constructivist methods is made. Part One also attempts to answer the question, "Why are mainstream adult learning methods perceived as radical in prison?" by looking at barriers to social learning from the ABE learner's and teacher's perspective. Part Two provides practical suggestions for engaging ABE students in the interesting and identity changing process of socially constructing meaning.

Introduction: A Social-Constructivist View of Literacy Learning in U.S. Prisons

This report presents the educational views of six incarcerated Adult Basic Education (ABE) learners and 25 correctional educators on the use of social and social-constructivist methods in U.S. prisons. For the purpose of this paper, social-constructivist pedagogies involve two key features: (a) a collaboration of at least two people[1], often in the form of conversation, that enables learners to safely explore and extend their own beliefs and feelings about a given topic; and (b) a positioning of the learner as an *expert*—i.e., by extending to learners the belief that they are capable of interpreting life experiences for themselves (MacCleod, 2004). From this perspective, literacy and language development are seen as intertwined and motivated by the need to make sense of the world. In ABE classrooms, even learners that struggle the most with reading and writing tasks are regarded as having valid opinions and the personal agency to construct personal purposes for learning.

However, many U.S. prison classrooms are places of silence where reflection and self-directed learning rarely occur and family (and other) relationships are discounted. This paper (Part One) reports on the perceived dangers associated with social-constructivist methods on the part of prisoners and teachers alike. On a more hopeful note, Part Two will describe their *radical*[2] ideas about transforming prison classrooms into safe spaces that value prisoners' conversations and perspectives.

Andragogy and Knowledge

In contrast to student-centered values implicit in the European Prison Rules (Warner, 1998), many U.S. prison systems operate within a "Responsibility Model" of Corrections (Seiter & Fleisher, 1999) that eschews student-centered learning in favor of top-down criminogenic

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[1] A collaborator might not be present, as would be the case in written correspondence or internal dialogue (see, for example Moffett, 1968).
[2] Radical only in terms of a departure from silent, highly individualized methods.

methods of intervention. These methods are reflected in diagnostic-prescriptive educational approaches that assess learners' competencies and prescribe educational remedies, often with little learner input other than, perhaps, a questionnaire about academic goals and vocational interests (Caplan, 2006). When top-down, individualized methods are integrated with approaches that allow students to express their own ideas and apply newly learned skills to real-life needs, they can be used quite effectively with adult literacy learners. However, when they are used *exclusively*, they risk student passivity; reinforce a sense that the learners' knowledge is inferior, and discount the students' life experiences as irrelevant to doing school (Fingeret, 1989).

Since Eduard Lindeman (1926) introduced America to the concept of andragogy—the study of how adults learn as distinct from the way children learn—educators have challenge top-down instructional methods. Adults learned best when they were free to choose, plan and evaluate their own learning (Knowles, 1998). Andragogy was based on self-planning (Cell, 1984), reflection on personal experience (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984), and social learning (Freire, 1970; Lindeman, 1926).

Sympathetic to these andagogical principles, social-constructivists studied ways adults construct knowledge through social networks and regarded their relationships, social activities and communities of practice as learning resources (Fingeret, 1983; Lytle, 2001; Wenger, 1998). Moll (1998) advocated the use of home ethnographies to tap local Latino/a communities' home-grown learning resources or 'funds of knowledge'. Gonzales (2005) defined funds of knowledge as "processes of everyday life, daily activities as a frame of reference, [that]…households possess" (p. 41). She criticized widespread school practices of discounting local culture, language, and funds of knowledge, and urged "reciprocal relationships between parents and teachers [and] the

pedagogical validation of household knowledge" (p. 41). Gonzales' argument illustrates a strong

social-constructivist view of knowledge:

> The border between knowledge and power can be crossed only when educational
>
> institutions no longer reify culture, when lived experiences become validated as sources of
>
> knowledge, and when the process of how knowledge is constructed and translated between
>
> groups located within non-symmetrical relations of power is questioned. (p. 42)

Self-knowledge, like other knowledge content, may be viewed as socially constructed as

well. Sociolinguists such as Heath (1994) and proponents of the New Literacies Studies (Street,

1984; Gee, 1990) note the way literacy mediates the communal nature of *identity work*. These

highly contextualized (non-academic, day-to-day) literacy models are interested (among other

things) in the way multiple literacies sometimes constitute autobiography—i.e., the construction of

identity through the Discourses[3] of local communities. O'Connor (2000) used narrative discourse

analysis to study the language of prisoners. She described how the act of listening allowed

prisoners to reflect on their beliefs about themselves and construct new self-concepts. "My work

proposes that one's own story…also serves to shape one's sense of self" (p. 5). She used

Vygotsky's (1978) work in social learning theory to explain how this recursive act of telling and

creating works:

> The contemplative moment, when a speaker reaches beyond the action recapitulation in a
>
> life story, enacts a Zone of Proximal Development, with the listener providing an audience
>
> on whom the speaker tries out his self-concept, a new word as it were. (p. 4)

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[3] Gee (2007) used this term, with a capital 'D', to refer to the way a network of people uses language—reading writing, talking, singing, etc.—as well as one's "body, clothes, gestures, actions symbols, tools" and other non-language "stuff" (P. 7) to shape a way of viewing the world, construct individual and group identities, and signal membership in the group.

Some have described this process of *trying out* new identities as perspective change and transformative learning (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1994). Correctional educators have argued that correctional education should be about transformation and not merely providing skills (Gehring, 1988; Osborne, 1916; Zaro, 2007).

This report on social-constructivist methods is grounded in a transformative view of ABE and correctional education. It values the principles of andragogy and the capacity of prisoners— even those who struggle with literacy—to socially construct knowledge. Yet these widely accepted principles (hardly radical in the human resource departments of corporate America, nor in K-12 classrooms) seem radical when contrasted with U.S. correctional policies aligned with the Responsibility Model. Despite the well-documented case for social learning, support for real-life literacy needs, and student-centered curricula, many U.S. prison classrooms remain spaces characterized by individualized instruction, decontextualized content, and silenced learners.

Silence and Struggle

What is literacy and who gets to define it? Traditionally, the term literacy was synonymous with print literacy. For example, UNESCO described a literate person thus: "A person is literate if s/he can both read and write a short simple statement describing his/her everyday life." (Canadian Education Association, 2006). Today lively debates and heated "circular" arguments (Kuhn, 1962, p. 64) abound. Literacy is sometimes used to mean one's ability to participate fully in society— e.g., health literacy, multicultural literacy, math literacy, computer literacy, media literacy. Social-constructivists and critical and postmodern theorists argue for a multiplicity of literacies that challenges the hegemony of academic literacy. They work to reveal the discounted funds of knowledge inherent in the Discourses of linguistic, racial and cultural minorities, and in the everyday meaning-making practices of those in the borderlands (Gee, 1990, Wright, 2006)

between linguistic worlds such as school and community. Others describe *thirdspaces* where hybrid literacy practices—e.g., academic and everyday discourses—collide and co-exist (Moje, Ciechanowski, Kramer, Ellis, Carrillo & Collazo, 2004; Wilson, 2004).

Despite these rich lenses, adults who struggle with print literacy often associate literacy with discrete skills, test taking and grades. Excluded from this view are everyday literacy practices, critical reflection, and the social construction of meaning (Lytle, 2001). Unfortunately these narrow associations are often associated with school failure. Fingeret and Drennon (1997) noted,

> Many adults with limited abilities to engage in literacy practices feel ashamed of their
> literacy problems. This often is learned very young, as children are left back in primary
> school or are taunted by peers…Most adults learn as children that their problems are their
> fault; they are told they are stupid or aren't trying hard enough…They never develop the
> critical analysis of their social world in which poor schooling, poverty, discrimination,
> crime, family situations, or other social and structural conditions share responsibility. (p.
> 68)

Boudin (1993) described how a group of women from a State prison in New York resisted social-constructivist, student-centered approaches to literacy instruction because they had "internalized years of failure in school, and [lacked] confidence in themselves as thinkers…" (p. 216). Despite pressing real-life literacy needs (e.g., writing letters to children, answering legal correspondences, researching AIDS), the women avoided sharing their personal concerns in the classroom. Boudin observed:

> The women frequently did not want to work with other women, feeling either embarrassed
> and ashamed of themselves or contemptuous of the others…From my observations in

class, and from conversations with the students, it appeared that the students had

internalized years of failure in school, and without the confidence in themselves as thinkers

they were very open to the safe routine of workbooks. (p. 216)

In the current study, six literacy learners[4] were asked to share their views of learning in

Federal prisons in the U.S. All but one reported struggling with learning as a child, and five

continued to struggle, even as they made hard-earned gains in skills (decoding, spelling) and

practices (letter writing, reading the newspaper). Like the adults in the studies by Fingeret and

Boudin, these learners expressed feelings of intense shame, embarrassment and fear.

Shame and Embarrassment

Five (of six) participants found reading (e.g., newspaper, simple texts) and writing (e.g.,

letters home, filling out forms) quite challenging. They expressed feelings of shame, hurt, and/or

frustration that resulted from their perceived rejection by significant others. One participant, Mark

Harrison[5], reveled the damage to his self-esteem caused by destructive school experiences. Thirty

years later he struggled to learn to read so he could prove—to himself and others—that he was not

stupid.

> I wanted to read! I wanted to read! I wanted to see if I was stupid [like] my sister and
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> people called me, [or if] something else…is causing it [his reading difficulties], for—I
>
> wasn't learning right. So, I don't think I was just stupid. I guess I wanted to prove people
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> wrong, my sister and…and I want to be able to read. I want to be able to look at things and,
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> you know, and read it.

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[4] This qualitative study was part of a larger study of 120 incarcerated literacy learners that involved the administration of traditional reading tests. Six learners were purposefully selected and invited to participate in individual open-ended interviews in which they could "tell their story" about learning in prison. As a group they represented: one female, two deportees, three African Americans, three Caucasians, one English language learner. For information about rapport, sample selection, data analysis and validity, please see Muth (2006).

[5] All names are pseudonyms.

Anne Blanchard described her motivation to prove to her family that she was making something of herself while in prison. She reported that one reason why her children's caretakers did not bring them to visit her in prison was because she was a 'bad mother.' She made a point of mentioning that she had "lots of papers" (documentation) to prove to them that she is now educated.

> …my family is real busy and nobody wants to come to a prison and see me locked up. They thinkin I be behind them bars...They get scared. They don't want to come up and see me. They say, "No...She was a bad mama."…I want to be much more when I walk out this door. I got papers -- lots of papers -- to go home…and show everybody -- this is what I've been doing since I been in prison…

Earle Wilson saw himself in his nephew, who struggled with hyperactivity in school and getting involved in fights. He discussed the parallels between his childhood problems with school and authority and those of his nephew. Earle was angry at his step-father for 'throwing him away' in a juvenile home when he was a child. These feelings of rejection continued to the present, as evidenced by the perpetuation of shame brought on by his sister and brother-in-law's pejorative use of his name "Earle Jr." to reprimand their son when he misbehaved.

> [Speaking of Earle's own childhood]…You should just try to deal with the child instead of throwing them away to a home or something…That was like my parent's easy way out…[My nephew]…is starting to go through the same things like I did…He gets blamed for everything. My sister likes yelling at him…even his father [says] like, "Hurry up, get your shoes on...you're a pain in the ass…you're so slow." He has been in fights and stuff …going the same way I did…You know, this doesn't help when they call him "Earle Jr."…"you're going to end up in prison just like your uncle." They use that for everything

on the kids…On both of the [boys]. Like they won't put their seatbelt on, [they say],

"You're going to jail like uncle Earle." Degrading me more, you know what I mean?

These prisoners shared a pervasive sense of shame, and it is likely that these feelings were rooted in early school failure, turned inward. They learned this lesson well: their knowledge was shamefully inferior. We shall now see how this negative lesson influenced the way these highly motivated individuals approached literacy learning as adult prisoners.

Learning in Isolation

Like the women in Boudin's (1993) study, the participants feared bringing the personal into the classroom. For them, literacy learning was mastery of skills; it was defined by the experts employed by the prison system; it was the stuff of textbooks and standardized tests. They spent a great deal of effort trying to avoid embarrassing encounters related to their 'inferior' literacy skills, and they saw the safe silent spaces of the classroom as a refuge. The idea of writing or talking about personal experiences and everyday literacy needs *in the classroom* was frightening to them. They preferred to cope with these needs outside of class, even if that meant they had to struggle to read and write letters alone, without support. For these learners, prison appeared to be a severely isolated experience.

Mark Harrison explained why he avoided "crowds" of more than one inmate. He described being on the receiving end of jokes, and he implied that even friendly banter could escalate into ridicule and harassment. Social sparring might be just a way to pass the time for inmates that can play the game and give it back, but for Harrison, who still carried bitterness towards those who called him "stupid" when he was a child, these tauntings were intolerable.

I stay away from the groups at all….If it's one person…I'll talk to them. If it's two there I'll avoid them because…it's like being ganged up. They'll start jerking and saying stuff. I walk away…I know I'm not a fighter or nothing but, you know, when I'm pushed against a wall and embarrassed in front of a lot of people, you know, then I'm going to say something back to them and then I'm involved in something -- so I avoid them...If [it's more than one inmate, and] I come up it's like I'm the jerk of the threesome…If I let it. One of the Irish guys in UNICOR [industries] told me, he says people will only do to you what you let them do to you…I think about that everyday because people will. They will treat me like shit …maybe because the way I walk, and the way I talk, and I'm not as smart as them, you know. I can…watch two guys [having] a normal conversation and then …then I walk by …they start to say something stupid to me…Once you start clowning around…they start saying faggot, dick sucker…bitch, whore, stupid… and then other people see it…and they're saying oh, I can do that, too…And then…you got the whole jail yelling, "Hey, you stupid bastard!"

Classrooms could be unsafe places, especially when the teacher was not present. Earle Wilson described the problems he experienced when Ms. R ___ left the room, the inability of the inmate-tutors to control the other inmates, and his own inability to report on the disruptions. According to Earle, the problem was compounded because most of the prisoners were forced to attend class, but had no real interest in learning.

…You…still have people that are disruptive in the classrooms…because they don't want to be there. They are being forced to be there…so they're talking and fooling around…I think that's a big issue in a prison…the ones who do want to learn are suffering because of the ones that are fooling around…And then…guys that want to learn see these guys

fooling around [and say], "Oh, I want to be cool, too. I don't want them to know that I want to learn. They might call me a dork or something." And then they fall in with them.

Because of his effort to remain disengaged socially, it is not surprising that Earle had little interest in transforming the literacy classroom into a place where men could design learning experiences around personal interests, needs and aspirations. Much of his resistance seemed attributable to a lack of trust of other inmates, particularly in light of his need to keep his literacy skills and practices private.

> …See then it wouldn't be good because that's not confidential…And other inmates will go say something and …you know what I mean, because it would be more like a [drug] program than…going to school. Like anger management or something where you could talk your [problems] out…where it's all confidential. In the classroom they [other inmates] just go tell whoever they [want].

Anne Blanchard did not feel the same level of shame and embarrassment around other incarcerated women (although she did feel this when facing her family on the outside). Nevertheless, she did not view prison classrooms as places to construct meaning, reflect on life, find her voice, or engage in personal literacy practices such as letter writing. This is especially striking because outside of class Anne struggled to maintain contact with her six children through letter writing even though she achieved profoundly low scores on all her reading tests. In this excerpt, Anne described how she struggled to stay focused on academics despite the recent death of her mother. Her mother had been the caretaker for her six children, ages five to eighteen, who were now split among three families and a juvenile detention facility.

> …Hmmm. It gets frustrating because, you know, we have a lot of stuff on our minds...especially home. And…it might get hard, but we know it [an education] is

something we need…When I go to school, I go there to learn. Whatever I got on my mind then, I take it out…you don't wanna bring your problems at class, because you're learning once you join the program…I had just lost my mom, August, and there was a lot of pressure...It seemed like my whole world had gone bad because…It was a lot on my mind, but…I'm a calm person; [when I came to class] I would calm it off, calm it off, and I wouldn't show my true feelings...

The interviews revealed specific ways that prisons repress those whose struggle to communicate in print has caused them to discount their own voices, limit their correspondences with the outside world and family, and avoid other prisoners.

Space and Power

The previous section leaves the reader with the image of incarcerated literacy learners as isolated, silenced and powerless. Spatial theory provides another perspective—one that sheds light on prisoners' funds of knowledge and turns the idea of deficit on its head. It illuminates spaces where prisoners are no longer powerless, but also, according to Wilson, "no longer non-literate or indeed no longer disengaged from the processes and practices associated with reading and writing." (A. Wilson, personal correspondence, June 19, 2008).

Thirdspace

Critical theorists have analyzed the social and historic forces that shape the way power is used to control others. Important as these historical/social analyses are, they can result in linguistic binaries—us/them, inside/outside, center/margin, silenced/privileged—that impose limits on fluid realities and identities. (If told repeatedly that you are powerless, disabled, or victimized, you will need to deconstruct these words before transcending them.) Without discounting historical and

sociological explanations of reality, Lefebvre (1991) opens up a third perspective on power: the spatial.

Soja (1996) describes three kinds of spaces: (a) *Perceived space* can be thought of as social space; it is "fixed mainly on the concrete materiality of spatial forms" (p. 10). Perceived space reflects the official view—e.g., the prison classroom is where we do school by partaking in individualized instruction and by progressing through textbooks. (b) *Conceived space* is imagined space. Teachers conceive of classrooms in terms of the curriculum by planning (conceiving) what will happen in this space. On the other hand, incarcerated literacy learners may conceive of the classroom space quite differently. Despite the *perceived* materiality of, for example, the TABE locator test, a particular item on a test might trigger *imagined* spaces, such as worries about a family member or sexual fantasies, or anger at the imposition of prison authority. (c) *Lived space* is the experience of space. For literacy students, the classroom may be experienced as tension between the official view of that space and an imagined counterspace (Hirst, 2004, p.55) that pushes against it.

This three-fold experience of space is *thirdspace*—a hybrid place in-between Discourses, in-between day-to-day and academic literacies, in-between the perceived and imagined. In this space learners are no longer powerless.

Wilson's (2003) description of prisoners' thirdspaces reveal their agency and resiliency:

> All those who spend time in prisons remain aware both of the outside worlds they have left behind and the perceived threat of Prisonisation with which they are faced. Rather than forget the former or be drawn into the latter, I maintain—and prisoners validate—that acquired knowledge of both 'Prison' and 'Outside' allows them to create a culturally-specific environment -- a 'third space' – in which to live out their everyday lives. (p. 5)

Wilson (2004) provided examples of ubiquitous, socially constructed third spaces in juvenile prisons—outside of official classrooms—where "prison space has been colonized, renamed…and reappropriated to reflect the rules of the streets rather than the rules of prison" (p. 73). In these non-prison/prison spaces, youth conceived and reconstructed personal and group identities by writing letters, taping greeting cards to cell walls, decorating walls with graffiti, creating poetry and listening to music.

Meeting in at the Borders

The current study examined learners' lived *classroom* experiences, in which their imaginations often took them far from the official curriculum. Participants described powerful imagined spaces that mocked, lampooned, or clashed with the perceived space of the prison classroom (Muth, 2006). They described intense and continuous thoughts about home that were rarely allowed voice in official school (firstspace). The emotional power of this imagined secondspace was typically experienced as tension and a distraction to doing school. Here is how Denis Vincent—a Haitian prisoner who entered the U.S. illegally and alone at the age of 13— described this privately lived hybrid space in which first and second spaces competed for his attention.

> …Sometimes I go in [the classroom]…I go in and do my work, but some days I get like frustrated...I come from outside with an attitude. I just go in there and feeling I don't want to do nothing...The attitude is like sometimes you get back flash...The attitude is just like the frustration that you heard…my mother is sick real bad and I can't do nothing for her. That's what comes to my head when I come into the class. That make me don't even want to do nothing. It's like…it's still inside, you know, it's hurting inside and you can't do nothing about.

Yet Denis Vincent shared a story about a time he reappropriated school resources to support a personal literacy practice:

> I got one of my childs' mother, you know, she didn't even want to bring my son here [for me] to see him…Sometimes I even discuss it with my teacher, too…I said, "I've got problems, Mrs. A___, I want to see my son. His mother won't bring him here to see me." [Ms. A___ said], "Why don't you go ahead and write a letter?…Bring it to my [attention]…I'll correct that letter you're making." And after she tells me, you know, all the frustrations will go away…talking can solve a lot of problems!

Denis' agency and voice defines this event and pushes against his teacher's conceived space (the official curriculum). But let us give credit to his teacher as well. Ms. A___ openly supported this "flight" (Kamberelis, 2004, p. 167) from the curriculum, and met Denis along the border between her thirdspace and his. These complementary acts of agency and openness resulted in a classroom transformed from silent tension to socially supported self-efficacy. In Denis' words, "talking can solve a lot of problems."

Our students' thirdspaces are spontaneous acts of agency. Given this, A. Wilson cautions that "we can't simply expect prisoners to see school as a middle ground or third space—they have their own third spaces…" (A. Wilson, personal correspondence, June 19, 2008). The social-constructivist seeks to shatter the silence of prison classrooms. Yes, but this is a tricky thing and cannot be legislated from above. Perhaps one of the ways correctional educators can apply thirdspace theory is dispositional—as the example of Ms. A___ above—by being prepared to open (or set aside) our conceived classroom spaces to make room for the imaginations of our students.

Generative Themes

Thirdspace theory reminds us of the agency of our learners and the ephemeral nature of dialogue in the prison classroom. It illuminates the 'lived experiences' of both teachers and learners, and the ways their worlds sometimes intersect within an impromptu space where power is shared and dialogue penetrates silence. We now turn to the content of these dialogues.

Freire (2002) used problem-posing to engage literacy learners in dialogue. From these conversations themes emerged that 'generated' critical investigations and new words were used to name injustices. These new words—or generative themes—became text for learning to read and write. Generative themes are transformative, because literacy learners

> …are aware of themselves and thus of the world [and]…exist in a dialectical relationship
>
> between the determination of limits and their own freedom. As they separate themselves
>
> from the world…as they locate the seat of their decisions in themselves and in their
>
> relations with the world and others, people overcome the situations which limit them.
>
> (Freire, 2002, p. 99)

Incarcerated learners struggle with issues of agency and helplessness. Findings from the current study suggest that prisoners' conceived and lived spaces—when examined and voiced in safe literacy classrooms—could, like Freirean themes, be used to empower them to actively investigate their worlds. In the examples that follow, we are struck by the way Mark Harrison and Anne Blanchard strive to push against the limits of their freedom, and we wonder how these strivings might inform and inspire their learning in an un-silenced classroom.

Mark Harrison imagined that school work would lead to a better relationship with his estranged 20-year-old daughter. Because of his spelling difficulties, he was too embarrassed to write letters. Yet his attempts at phone conversations were excruciatingly painful:

> My daughter, I talk to her on the phone. I say, "Do you have any questions?" because her mother -- you know, her mother and me split up and I haven't talked to her for years…[and] she's like, "No." And I'm sitting on the phone and there's like all this air time and that hurts so bad that I can't call her any more…I try, I just try to read and get it [the phone call] off my mind because there's nothing I can do, you know. Maybe if I was there in person or something like that…

These feelings of impotence depressed Mark, but also fueled his drive to learn to spell and read.

Anne Blanchard imagined a future at home, when she could make things right with her children. She also wrestled with guilt and anger associated with the death of her mother—the caretaker of her six children—and having to wait until she died to attend her funeral and visit her family.

> My momma always loved…my kids…The only thing she asked from me [was to] get on a train and come home…They would say she only had four months to live…but I could never accept that…and not being able to do nothing. The only thing she could do was to sit and wait on death. And I had to sit and wait, and wait, and wait [too]…I always send pictures to [the five year old son] and...my daughters say, "Well, this is momma." And sometimes I call and talk to them and stuff. He [her oldest son, who was currently in juvenile detention]...don't really talk that much, he really didn't say nothing about [her mother's death] and...we didn't really have much time to get into it, me and all my kids. But [when] we have a chance to talk about it...when I go home, just everything, I'm gonna lay down, anything they wanna talk about.

Mark's and Anne's stories clarify the power and intensity of prisoners' imagined spaces. When these deeply personal thoughts are devalued—either by the student or the teacher—and

deemed unwelcome in the ABE class, they remain detriments, distractions from the official curriculum, and, perhaps most tragically, unresolved life problems: further proof of the prisoner's impotence. Conversely, one wonders, if a teacher like Ms. A___ above could open a space to value and validate them, might these imagined spaces become engines of linguistic energy and potent funds of knowledge? The extent to which correctional educators legitimize these generative themes and the social-constructivist pedagogies that nurture them will be touched on below, and addressed fully in Part Two.

Teachers Thoughts about Prisoners' Voice and Social-Constructivist Methods

On-line discussions[6] with U.S. correctional educators conducted in winter, 2007, centered on topics related to prisoners' voice and social-constructivist methods in prisons. This section presents a brief summary of themes; in part two of this paper, the teachers' views will be explored in depth. It should be noted that these on-line discussions were not systematically gathered, nor do they constitute a representational sample of correctional educators in the U.S. Rather the themes demonstrate a range of beliefs shared by a group of motivated educators who freely participated in on-line courses and discussion groups.

Themes about prisoners' funds of knowledge. Educators expressed both concerns and enthusiasm for tapping the personal voices and imagined spaces of their students. Reservations included: (a) prisoner fears and embarrassment, (b) teacher fear of losing control, (c) narrow curriculum, and (d) lack of support from the administration. In this excerpt, one teacher expresses her concerns about using role plays and other emotionally stirring experiences in academic classes:

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[6] Sources include national on-line discussion boards sponsored by the National Institute for Literacy, the Correctional Education Association, and Virginia Commonwealth University. All citations in this report are used with permission from the educators.

When I wrote training curricula for child welfare training, I avoided role play as a technique in most situations (due primarily to my own dislike of role playing). In the one place I did write it in, teaching child protective workers to use dolls with anatomical parts in interviewing children who were alleged to be the victims of child sexual abuse, I was astounded at its impact on those professionals. I was even more astounded by the number of participants who, in the training context, disclosed their own abuse as children. It can be like opening Pandora's box…

I agree with those who question their own comfort and experience to deal with something that could be so emotionally volatile, particularly in the environment in which we work. I have agonized over expanding a "read aloud/books on tape" program within our adult institutions because the books we think would be the most engaging also have the potential to be the most emoting. (3/04/2007)

Thus, the more correctional educators engage learners in talk, the more we may risk losing control by opening a Pandora's Box of emotions. This caution is not to be taken lightly; it represents one valid way prison classroom spaces are imagined and lived.

On the other hand, educators made the following arguments in favor of social-constructivist learning: (a) social learning is a function of the rapport between students and teachers, (b) social-constructivist methods are highly engaging for students, (c) staff development programs should provide support for social learning methods and on-going scaffolding for teachers, and (d) social-constructivist methods can be viewed as on a continuum and introduced gradually. Here is how one teacher conceived prison classroom as a safe space for social learning and hybrid discourses:

Interesting…In our car pool, we were talking about our classes, students and our

administrators. In school, it seems the social and cultural barriers are left behind. The

conversation began with the issues of riots and lockdowns. Our students are most often

cooperative, and many of mine are willing to take risks…We have many spontaneous

teachable moments in class. One of my students, at my request, got up and demonstrated

"hopping" for the other [English Language Learners]. If a black student needs tutoring in

math, they go to a very capable white tutor. It is encouraging to see school be a safe place.

But out on the yard there are so many issues that appear to get in the way of education.

(3/07/2007)

In this view of prison classrooms, social and cultural barriers are fluid, and prisoners' thirdspaces

are validated.

Best practices. Malcolm Knowles might find it ironic that andragogy—as student-centered

learning—may more readily be found in U.S. elementary schools than in some prison-based

literacy. Nevertheless, the educators shared a wealth of creative teaching strategies that invited

students' voices into the classroom. These included: (a) discussions, (b) learning logs, (c) semantic

feature analysis strategies, (d) jig saws, (e) role plays, (f) personal essays and journaling, (g)

respect for students' Discourses, (h) support for letter writing and (i) new ways of viewing

thirdspaces in the classroom. (These methods will be covered at length in Part Two of this report.)

Here is one teacher's thoughts about her students' letter writing in class, and her own openness to

their thirdspaces:

I know in many facilities, letter writing, would not been seen as beneficial. My feelings on

it would be to compare it to journal writing. The students want their letters to impress, so

they use the dictionary. They check their spelling, and have used the thesaurus to find

words that would impress to show their expanding vocabulary. I have someone calling out

how to spell a word, to spell check quite often. They spend more time and effort on their

letters than work I require. To some it might be a status symbol. They write the best letters

and give advice to others. I've seen and read the books of letters and poems that have been

written or collected for the phrases that work best. They collect them from each other, lines

from songs, cards they've been sent, they've got a collection like a card catalog. For some

this is their hustle, how they get needed items.

What I have found prevalent in my seven years of correctional teaching, is the students

love of the dictionary. They want their words spelled correctly. One of my observations in

the use of the dictionary is constructing letters to show their knowledge. They want to

impress, so really try to do a good job with sentence structure and punctuation. Once we

have completed our work and they have some free moments, I let them construct

letters…It makes them feel good, they are learning and I feel it's very beneficial to them…

It's one of the best motivators for self improvement, feedback from their peers or families.

(3/08/2007)

For this educator, personal literacy practices are not seen as acts of defiance, nor as

incongruent with the official literacy program. She makes room for a thirdspace not unlike the one

Denis Vincent described—where imagined space and official space are openly negotiated, literacy

learners are not embarrassed to talk about their day-to-day literacy needs, and student-constructed

resources are validated and shared.

<div align="center">Conclusion: Part One</div>

This first-of-two papers reports findings from recent studies of U.S. prisoners and

correctional educators. It provided a rationale for using social-constructivist methods in prison

ABE classrooms, and described the frequent disconnect between learners' pressing literacy needs and the official prison curriculum. Part One then examined some of the perceived barriers—on the part of students and teachers—that make learner-centered approaches appear radical and dangerous. Social-constructivist methods differ fundamentally from individualized, criminogenic methods associated with the Responsibility Model, the reigning paradigm in U.S. prisons today. Criminogenic methods typically involve the assessment of discrete skills and measure learners' proficiencies against societal norms. Social-constructivist methods value learners' interpretations of life experiences by engaging them in talk, valuing their Discourses, and sharing control of the curriculum.

Ironically but perhaps not surprisingly, most of the literacy learners in this study resisted ideas about self-expression and self-directed learning (at least in the official classroom), despite the ubiquitous presence of a silenced secondspace in which imagined thoughts of home clashed with the firstspace of the official program. Much of this learner resistance resulted from deeply ingrained feelings of shame and embarrassment, an intense fear of being mocked by others for being stupid, and a view of learning that privileges expert knowledge and debases interpretive (self-constructed) knowledge: school is where the teacher gives and the student receives.

Despite these barriers and impediments to social-constructivist learning, spatialized lenses—especially thirdspace theory—enable us to avoid oppressive labels such as *illiterate* and *silenced*, and to see learners' imagined spaces not as distractions from learning, but as funds of knowledge and generative themes. Thirdspace theory shines a light on counter-spaces that are often the source of tension in prison classrooms. But this light can be confusing and frightening to those accustomed to doing school in safe, regimented, asocial spaces, and those interested in reform may need to approach this problem in progressive steps.

The failure of top-down models to recognize the need for safe places where learners can talk and think is a costly one. First, there are the learning costs: fatigue and boredom (for teacher as well as student) resulting from a steady diet of decontextualized/ individualized instruction. But, beyond the missed opportunities—for debating complex issues, sharing parenting ideas, studying words and ideas charged with power and relevance, making personal and interesting connections to mathematics and history—there is a profound human cost. If not in our literacy classrooms, where will these literacy learners find safe spaces to reflect on and transcend identities stunted by early school failure? Where will they be allowed to conceptualize ways to repair the harm they have caused others? Where will they find support for rebuilding bridges with loved ones through letter writing? Where will they find validation for their voices? Where will they learn to look critically at the social forces that have defined and silenced them?

Part Two of this report presses the case for social-constructivist methods and covers in detail the thoughts of U.S. correctional educators related to this idea. Practical suggestions for introducing and expanding these methods in U.S prisons will be explored, in the hope that, one day, conversation-centered ABE classrooms will be more widely accepted as commonplace rather than radical.

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