

Prison University Project



A Newsletter of the Prison University Project

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From the Executive Director

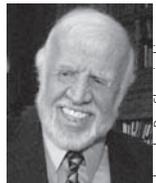
Dear Friends,

One theme that repeatedly emerges in the short writings contained in this newsletter is the intensely relational dimension of education. Over and over again, teachers and students describe the significance of their personal interactions – the satisfaction of exploring ideas *together*, and of being able to ask questions and receive encouragement from someone who truly cares. Of course such needs are hardly limited to students – *each* of us flourishes from a sense of collaboration and community, of being recognized and encouraged by others whom we trust and admire.

One person who has provided such support to the Prison University Project, and to me personally, over the last several years was our very dear board member John D Nichols, executive director of the Lazarus Foundation and director of Benevolence for the Church of God in Cleveland, TN, who died on March 13. John was one of the most compassionate, intelligent, and open-minded human beings I've ever known. A week before he died, he wrote to me about our work at San Quentin: "Your compassion not only touches that one person you are able to lift out but ripples out to affect everyone that touches those lives. You will never know the impact that you are having on these people in your work."

One vital teaching that John insisted upon was that executive directors *must* get over their anxieties about asking others to support their work financially: *It's not about us, it's about the work*. So, in the spirit of his awesome example – particularly in these very difficult financial times – I ask each of you who is able to make a contribution to support our vital mission!

With warm regards,
Jody Lewen



John D. Nichols in Berkeley, 2007

photo by Peg Skorpinski

Raising Awareness Locally On February 26, PUP participated in an Awareness Day on prisons at the Branson School in Ross. The school-wide, day-long series of lectures, panel presentations, and interactive learning sessions included (pictured above from left to right): Jody Lewen, former CDCR undersecretary Jeanne Woodford, former College Program students Phillip Seiler and Jeff Atkins, and Awareness Day student organizers Olivia and Dylan. SQ public information officer Sam Robinson also presented.

Our course offerings this semester include: English 99A, English 99B, English 101, Communications, Sociology, Ethics, Biology, Korean History, Creative Writing, Statistics, Math 50, Algebra, Geometry, Pre-Calculus, and Calculus. This special issue of the PUP newsletter highlights some of these classes.

Changing my life as a person, and a man

ENGLISH 99A

By Michael Scott, Student

(Instructors: Jessica Koistinen, Lia Izenberg, Kelsey Krausen)

Notebook in hand, paper, and pen. I sit in class, and learn things I once knew in life. And some things I never knew about English, and grammar. I feel the joy of adolescence creeping back in my soul. The adolescent joy of learning, and being taught by someone. Wanting to impress my teacher, show her how much she has taught me. Every thing from narrative essay, to persuasive essay. Learning how to write journals, and thesis. I've learned a lot of things. Essay structure, topic sentence. How to elaborate my thoughts into a counter argument. It's hard to describe what we have been doing. But it's way easier to tell you. That I'm learning a lot of stuff. And changing my life as a person, and man. So the best way to describe what we have been doing in class, is change our life.

Because the more I come to class the happier I get. The humanity come back into my heart, and away goes the harden cold feeling of pain, and hate from prison. I feel alive like the words and grammar of stories. I feel confidence I'm on the right path to prosperity. That I know I can make out in society. That the person I was, before the negative lifestyle is reborn. The phoenix has finally got the chance to rise from the ashes of life.

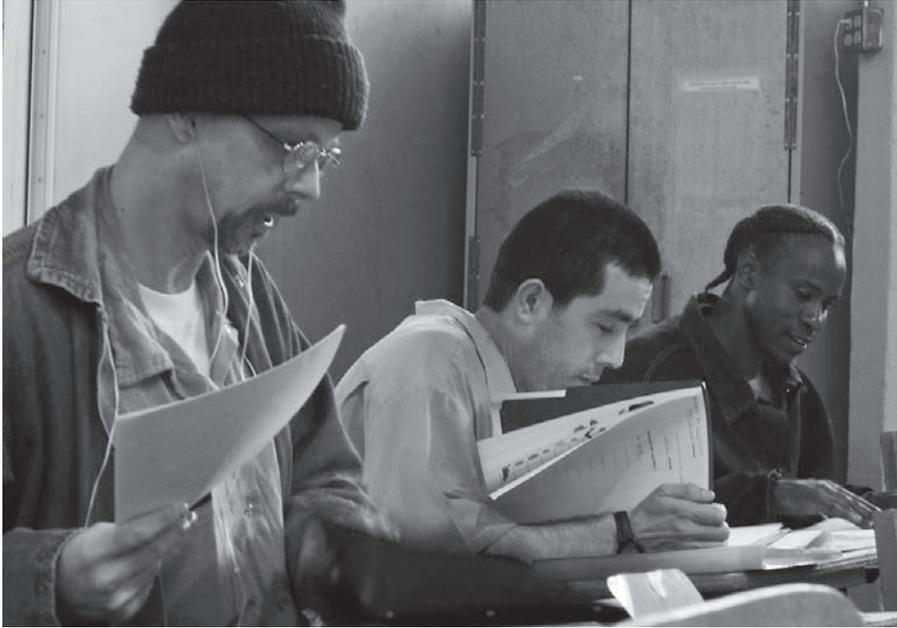


photo by Andrew Kenower

“Prove it”

□ GEOMETRY

Gireeja Ranade and Krish Eswaran, co-instructors with Justin Bledin, Clement Barthes

“What is the world?”
 “A planet!”
 “What is a planet?”
 “It’s a round sphere.”
 “What is a sphere?”

A collective groan fills the room, as though everyone is thinking: Where did they find these characters? Did I walk into the wrong class?

The game continues into round two. Skeptically, they play along until they can’t define things anymore. A new round starts with a more relevant question: “So, what is a point?” “A dot.” “And what is a dot?” The groan transforms into a laugh, and soon instructors and students are smiling. A few minutes later, postulate is no longer a foreign term.

Welcome to SQ 125: Geometry. One of the goals in Geometry is to teach logical reasoning. The syllabus is designed to develop skills to solve complicated problems, beyond the facts about polygons and circles. To get there, the students must learn to appreciate another groan-inducing

concept: the proof. It’s a challenge to learn and a challenge to teach. Could we do it?

“Why can’t we just take the theorem as our postulate? I’m confused.”

“SAS? Why not SSA? I’m confused.”

“Why draw line DA? Why not EA? I’m confused.”

The questions plague both students and instructors. In-class handouts and activities and long homework assignments help all of us out; the groans and questions vanish. Now, challenges are thrown back at us: “I don’t believe those diagonals bisect each other. Prove it!”

Slowly, the proofs move up the staircase. The side-splitter theorem goes down in the history of SQ 125 with the reaction: “Cool! That was actually fun!” If the students think a proof is cool, then it was all worth the effort.

To our students: We hope you agree with that conditional statement and got something out of the class. We certainly learned a lot from you! □

“Why be good?”

□ ETHICS

Helene Silverberg, Co-instructor (with Ben Boudreaux, Brandon Absher, and Tom Clark)

The semester began with a discussion of the fundamental question “Why Be Good?” and we then spent a couple of weeks exploring three major traditions of ethics--utilitarianism, Kantianism and relativism--including reading several of the most important thinkers in these traditions, such as John Stuart Mill, Immanuel Kant and Ruth Benedict. The rest of the semester will be spent applying these models to concrete situations. We will explore both how these dilemmas, and the way we can resolve them, have been shaped and constrained by the law.

Class discussions have been wonderfully rich and lively. Everyone has had to confront ethical dilemmas of some sort in life, and the intellectual challenge has been in having the students explore the reasoning underpinning their ethical choices. In the first week, we discussed the example of a man who needed medicine for his sick wife. We asked whether it was permissible, under these conditions, to steal from a pharmacist, and whether it would be permissible to use violence to get the necessary medicine. Most students seemed to feel that it would be morally acceptable for the husband to steal in order to help his wife, but they also felt that the theft should be punished by law. Others felt that, even under these circumstances, it would not be morally acceptable to steal. It was clear that most student have a strong sense of moral obligation, even when they are unable to live up to it. I feel it’s an honor to be able to engage these students in this kind of discussion, which is so rare in ordinary life “on the outside.” And I also sense the students feel these discussions are helping them get a better sense of why and how to take responsibility for their own actions, past, present and future. □

AT SAN QUENTIN

“Rentin’ Out Your Head”

□ SOCIOLOGY

Julie Setele, Co-instructor (with Tryon Woods, Karin Martin, and Randy Reyes)

Many sociology classes begin with the premise that individual “troubles” are intimately connected with, and can be understood only within the context of, larger societal “issues.” This perspective highlights the interplay between agency and structure, that is, between one’s individual opportunities, values, and aspirations, and structural and institutional forces like white supremacy or predatory capitalism. A common assignment in introductory classes asks students to examine their own lives through this lens. While students begin with subject matter that they seem to know best, they are encouraged to delve beneath the surface to explore what is usually taken for granted. I have used this assignment numerous times, but I have never found it as illuminating as this semester at San Quentin.

Reading students’ initial forays into this assignment, I was struck by the way in which student after student professed their agency, “taking responsibility” for the actions that had led them to prison. (At the same time, many students astutely identified and discussed in depth the various structural forces that shaped their individual paths.) The formulaic nature of these testaments of personal responsibility caught my

attention. I was reminded of other works by prisoner authors using this convention, as well as public policy debates on welfare and education demanding individual accountability. While I do not disregard the actions of my students and their “responsibility” for them, I encourage them to view “personal responsibility” as a socially constructed, human-made concept, embedded in power relationships and open to critique. This is tricky, though, since the rehabilitative project of contemporary prisons is deeply invested in inmates “taking responsibility” in this way. Prisoners practice using the language of personal responsibility in self-help groups and then may be tested on it when they go before the parole board or otherwise interact with those who hold power over them. Telling those in power what they want to hear, described elsewhere as “rentin’ out your head,” is a survival tactic that my students and I both employ, whether with teachers, employers, parole officers, or dissertation advisors. I wonder to what extent I am asking my students to “rent out their heads” to me, and if that is justifiable by the educational enterprise or simply another form of domination. □

“Exploring our collective differences”

□ COMMUNICATIONS

Chrisfno Kenyatta Leal, Student

When I signed up for Communications I had a feeling that this class would be much different than any other I’ve taken in the past, and from day one Dom, Karen, Vince and Sharyl left no doubt that my feeling was accurate. On the first night of class students and teachers alike engaged in the development of a classroom contract that reflects the aspirations, fears, and expectations of the class for the semester. Needless to say I was surprised that the instructors would take such an approach, but at the same time I thought it was a pretty cool idea because it initiated dialog that supports mutual understanding of ideas and facilitates exploration of our collective differences.

In my eyes, the best thing about such an approach is that we’re not just talking about the principles of communication, we’re actually making a conscious effort to incorporate these principles into the structure of the class. Because of this I’m learning more and looking forward to everything else this course has to offer. □

“Overabundant love”

□ CALCULUS

Michael Villanueva F., III, Student

This semester I am on a spaceship exploring the universe of calculus. I cannot believe I started in Math 50. Each time I walk into class I find my study time pleasantly rewarded not only because calculus is interesting but also because of the relationship with the teachers and the students. I look forward to those moments of interaction before, during, and after class. Best of all I am being rewarded for getting an education that as best as I can see harms no one. On the contrary, getting an education rebuilds society from the inside. Instead of sending out an angry and isolated prisoner/parolee, you send out men with an education that gives them hope. Society benefits more from a sense of duty than a sense of fear.

In my experience the College Program at San Quentin acts from a sense of duty to love your neighbor not as yourself but in excess of yourself, Ricoeur’s commandment of overabundant love. So, each day I go about doing my duty as a conscientious prisoner/student, I get to appreciate not only the work of my teachers but also the fruit of my efforts. □



photo by Phillip Carter

UPDATES

“Doing numbers is exciting to me now”

□ MATH 50

James Earl Evans, Student

I would like to thank the teachers in Math 50. They have not only affected the way I think, but the way I look at education in the future. I love math now, doing numbers is exciting to me and I look forward to class three times a week. Since I enrolled in your Prison University Project the whole look out on life has changed. The way I see people has changed and just maybe I will become some one that matters. □

Is It Safe?, the exhibition of essays and photographs of students in the College Program, remains on view at Alcatraz Island. Visiting the exhibit has inspired some, like high school teacher Perry Cicchini of Michigan, to use the collection of essays as assigned reading in the classroom. Perry sent this note about how his students have responded.



I want to let you know that *Is It safe?* was/is an overwhelming success. The students reacted to a lot of stuff -- their own experience with jails and prisons through family members and friends, the *idea* of imprisonment, the openness and honesty of the writers, the power of memories -- but perhaps the most consistent and insistent observation was of the men's humanity. Virtually all the students reflected on that realization during their speeches and our subsequent discussions. I actually had a couple of students who I'd never met approach me about borrowing copies of the book because their friends were talking about it. This is a rare occurrence.

I tell you, things like *Is It Safe?*, *The Things They Carried*, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, the films *Smoke Signals* and *The Brother from Another Planet* -- these pieces of art really turn on students' interest, minds and emotions amidst a curriculum of classics. Students wanted to continue reading *Is It Safe?* once they'd started. Many asked to bring it home to continue reading. I have a 10th grader with about a sixth grade reading level who asked if he could hang onto *Is It Safe?* after the unit was done because he hadn't finished it yet. He hates reading. But he read that entire book. Every essay.

So that's the whole story. If you are ever in the Detroit area, you're always welcome at Room 111. —Perry Cicchini

On March 10, Jody Lewen testified at a joint hearing of the Senate and Assembly Public Safety Committees on prison education in Sacramento. A video of the hearing can be found on the PUP website at prisonuniversityproject.org.



On April 3, author **Dave Eggers** came to San Quentin to discuss *What Is the What?* with a group of students who had read the book. Topics of conversation ranged from the current political situation in Sudan to writing fictional autobiography to the activities of the Valentino Achak Deng Foundation. Dave Eggers expressed appreciation for how closely students had read the book.

Starting April 17, PUP will be hosting a **lecture series on sentencing policy** in California and the U.S. Confirmed participants include Kara Dansky, Frank Zimring, Marsha Rosenbaum, Elsa Chen, and Jonathan Simon.

A Very Special Event

On March 28, PUP held its first fundraising event, generously hosted by Savory Thymes and Hans Schoepflin in Mill Valley. Tobias Wolff, a good friend to writers at San Quentin, was the special guest. Over 100 people attended, including college program volunteers, friends, and supporters, as well as eleven former students and their guests. Pictured below are Eddy Zheng, Doug Butler, Pat Mims, and Leonard Neal.



Who We Are and What We Do

The mission of the Prison University Project is to provide excellent higher education to people incarcerated at San Quentin State Prison, and to stimulate public awareness and meaningful dialogue about higher education and criminal justice in California.

The College Program at San Quentin provides approximately twelve courses each semester in the humanities, social sciences, math, and science leading to an Associate of Arts degree in liberal arts, as well as college preparatory courses in math and English, to over 250 students. The program is an extension site of Patten University in Oakland. All instructors work as volunteers. The Prison University Project receives no state or federal funding and relies entirely on donations from individuals and foundations.

Major expenses include textbooks and school supplies, publications, education and outreach activities (including conferences), office rent and utilities, and three full-time staff salaries. PUP's annual cash budget is under \$500,000, but when the value of all volunteer teaching hours (and other pro bono labor) is included, PUP's annual budget exceeds \$1 million.