

Is another pedagogical world possible?

Teaching globalization to my fellow prisoners

James Kilgore (Published in Radical Teacher 95, May 2013)

I spent many years before my incarcerations as a popular educator for left-wing trade unions and social movements in South Africa. I took my role as a critical pedagogue of the Freirian stripe quite seriously. However, after five years of working as a twenty cent an hour teacher's aide in various federal and California state correctional facilities I'd lowered my pedagogical horizons to helping people pass their GED math test.¹ I had rigorously studied the mock exams, designed a plethora of practice tests, and tirelessly drilled the motivated and the not so motivated on the wonders of simultaneous linear equations and the Pythagorean theorem. While in free life my workshop plans overflowed with learner activity and critiques of neoliberalism, the watchful eye of prison authorities and my own paranoias had reduced my creativity pragmatic questions: applying the formulas for areas and volumes to construction jobs or relating probability to the crap games that regularly dotted the yard. Then opportunity came knocking in the strangest of places: the ultra-repressive, racially-charged yards of High Desert State Prison. Through a convergence of coincidence, luck and my own initiative, I found the space to dialog about the vagaries and interpretations of globalization and political economy, momentarily transforming our militarily structured classroom into a space of self-activity and dialog.

In this article I will describe a set of workshops on the global economic crisis in 2008 that I ran in the at High Desert State Prison in California. I will begin by providing some background about the prison as well as outlining the education program at High Desert. From there I will describe the planning, process and content of the workshops and finally offer some assessment. I will pay particular attention to my positionality as a white man imprisoned for political offenses. Also, in the spirit of convict criminology, I offer this as an alternative point of view to the dominant narratives on prison education. As Stephen Richards has pointed out, the voices of outside experts often drown out those of people who have actually experienced incarceration. While there is a host of useful and at times brilliant writings on prison education, many of which actually foreground the voice of the incarcerated (Davidson 1995; Trounstein 2001; Lamb 2003, 2007; Walker 2004; Tregea and Larmour 2009, Hartnett 2011), precious few "convict educators" have had the opportunity to speak. Hence, in addition to describing an educational process, I hope this article joins with efforts by Boudin (1993) and Zoukis (2010) to highlight the conditions under which incarcerated educators operate and points out that some of us try to

¹ For a more detailed description of my work as a GED tutor in prison and my approach to critical pedagogy see Kilgore 2011.

practice our own forms of critical pedagogy under circumstances even far more constrained and at times dangerous than those faced by teachers who come from the street.

Background

High Desert State Prison (HDSP) lies on the outskirts of Susanville, the subject of an appropriately titled 2007 PBS documentary, "Prison Town, U.S.A." Located in far northeastern California, the economy of this former mining and logging town of 13,000 (2000 census) revolves around three prisons: a medium and low security facility known as CCC, a minimum security camp which supplies fire fighters to the state forestry services, and High Desert a modern high and medium security penitentiary.

High Desert holds about 5,000 men in five yards". Each is a self-contained unit. Three yards are high security, Level Four in California corrections parlance. HDSP's Level Four yards have a reputation as places that "rock and roll" - on a par in terms of violence with more famed institutions such as Pelican Bay and Corcoran. While I spent some time on one of the Level Four yards, the education experience I write about took place on a Level Three, medium security site that housed roughly nine hundred people. About 800 of us lived in the four massive concrete blocks of two man cells, with the remainder squeezed into the triple bunks of the converted gym.

Two aspects of the culture of High Desert and the California state prison system are crucial to the context of my educational intervention. The first is the dominating presence of racial segregation and white supremacy. My personal history made this environment particularly surreal. Throughout the 1990s I lived in South Africa as the country moved through the transition from apartheid to democracy. Though not a process without contradiction,² an ethos of hope dominated the social landscape, characterized by the ubiquity of passionate debate and struggle over equality. The desirability of equality, let alone the inacceptability of openly racist discourse was never in question.

But at High Desert a sinister mingling of institutional policy and on-the-ground racist consciousness had produced a cauldron of racial hatred befitting of Pretoria in 1977. At the institutional level, the prison authorities refused to assign people of "different races" to the same cell. The administration also maintained segregated phones and followed a policy of racially-based lockdowns. If two white men got into a fight, the whites would be confined to their cells while everyone else went about their normal program. If a black man and a white

² For more details on the complexity of the South African transition see my novel (2011a) plus works by Alexander 2010, Bond 2005, Bell and Ntsebeza 2003. .

man got into a fight, all blacks and whites would be confined to their cells while the remaining groups³ carried on with business as usual.

The behavioral codes of the race-based political structures within the population buttressed institutional practice. For example, the rules for whites dictated no food or drink could be shared with a member of “another race.” Offering a black man a sip of coffee was punishable by a severe beating at minimum. On the Level Four yards, where a “no hands” policy prevailed in terms of physical conflict, a stabbing was a much more likely consequence. Furthermore, the men had developed their own racial organization of space that mandated separate facilities in the yard and in the public areas inside the buildings known as “day rooms.” There were “black” pullup bars and “white” pullup bars, “black” showers and “white” showers, “black” basketball courts and “white” basketball courts. Latinos, Native Americans and “Others” fell on one side or the other. For whites, the code of behavior was complemented by incessant ideological explanations and at times debate between the various strands of white supremacy: the Skinheads, the Peckerwoods, the Hells Angels, the Nazis. While not all the white men completely bought into the ideas of white supremacy, bucking the system was suicide. No one, including myself, volunteered for this self-destructive mission. Those of us who rejected racism found our own ways to push the envelope. Education was one way to do this.

Secondly, High Desert was highly militarized. The slightest physical conflict or rumor of a conflict would set off an alarm. In response, all the prisoners on the yard or in the day rooms would have to sit down. If an actual fight was taking place, gun tower guards would frequently fire wooden bullets or tear gas from high powered rifles at the combatants. Any conflict would also bring a running caravan of guards from the other yards. Hence within a couple minutes a militarized force of 60 or 70 troops sporting pepper spray, clubs and various assault rifles would appear. When a fight involved a weapon, we might remain seated in the yard for hours while guards combed the grounds in search of the missing knife. If the search was unsuccessful, every man on the yard was often forced to strip naked so the guards could take the search to another level.

The School

The education block, called “Mountain View Adult School” despite the fact that it had no windows, consisted of a locked facility with three classrooms, a rest room, an office for the guard on duty and a computer center. The students could not be left alone in the class. If a teacher had to use the rest room, either the students would be sent into the hallway and the classroom door locked or the guard assigned to education would sit in while he/she used the

³ The official categories were Northern Mexican, Southern Mexican, Mexican National, American Indian and “other” (yes that was a real category which included people who identified as “Asians,” “Pacific Islanders,” “Middle Eastern,” etc)

bathroom. When a student wanted to use the bathroom, they had to carry a “hall pass.” No more than two men were allowed in the bathroom at a time. When an alarm went off, students had to remain in their desks. If they were in the hallway, they had to sit down where they were.

The GED Class

Our GED class had 27 men who attended from 7:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. with half an hour break in the middle. The teacher (my boss) was Mrs. Patterson (not her real name) a mid-50s white woman who had spent nearly two decades at various teaching posts in the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). Unlike the vast majority of teachers I encountered in CDCR, Mrs. Patterson took her work seriously and had a fairly progressive view on the world. She was clearly anti-racist, though not prone to push the point. She came to school every day with lesson plans and treated the men with respect, addressing them as “Mr.”, a rare practice in prison. Her methodology however, was solidly in the traditional classroom teacher mold. She did no project work, no group activities. Her sessions fell square within the teacher centered category. Despite the tedium, a few students showed interest. The majority were just doing their time in her class instead of working in the kitchen or the laundry. .

Mrs. Patterson biggest challenge was math. She battled to explain simple concepts and complete the problems required for the GED test. One day, without warning, she just called me to the white board and asked me to teach the lesson on basic algebra. She knew I had done this before at another prison. I readily accepted and from then on, the math sessions were mine. The men responded well, constantly reminding Mrs. Patterson that I seemed to know more math than she did. They liked the idea that one of their ranks was smarter than a “teacher.” This helped establish my credibility among the men as an educator which would be useful later on.

At the same time, in the outside world, the global economic crisis was kicking into gear. Through my very limited news sources: PBS, network news and copies of *USA Today* which I got five days late, I managed to keep tabs on economic events. I was thinking what a great teaching moment this would be if I were back in Cape Town leading a workshop of class conscious trade unionists. I day dreamed of role plays with participants representing different global economic forces or simulation exercises where the classroom transformed into a session of the World Economic Forum. Then I began to think of the possibilities where I was.

I discussed the idea of some sessions on the crisis with Mrs. Patterson. She was interested until I mentioned group work. She said she had tried group work a few years back on one of the Level Four yards. In preparation, she’d rearranged the desks into circles before class. When the students entered the room, they refused to sit down. They immediately called for a “sergeant” (a person in authority at the yard level) to come and rectify the situation. The men

explained to Mrs. Patterson that if she forced them to sit with members of another race or interact in certain ways with them, it could have serious consequences. As she put it, they accused her of trying to “get them killed.” Based on that experience, she wasn’t eager to do group work in her class. I let my proposal rest for a couple weeks.

While I had no doubt the events she reported had taken place, two things were different in my case. First, this was a medium security yard with far less racial tension and propensity for violence. Second, as a person with a prison number, I carried a different type of baggage than Mrs. Patterson. I could get permission from the students to carry out the plan.

In this regard, my positionality as a white man with a political background provided an advantage. For the men of color, I was clearly not one of the mainstream “haters.” I had proven my beliefs in deeds. For the others, even the whites, my involvement in small group violence against the state added a certain “street credibility.” People might not have respected my politics, but they respected my audacity. Also, in terms of my relationships with the white population, I had never confronted the racial politics of the yard. I had chosen to resist quietly, building friendships with blacks and Latinos while not openly breaking the codes of segregation. Though I found this a despicable choice, I lived with it as the only workable compromise and it had bought me a respectful coexistence with the supremacists.

A couple weeks later I went back to Mrs. Patterson. She went along with the groups as long as I let the students choose their group members. Her assumption was that they would divide along racial lines, thereby avoiding her previous problem. I politely said I didn’t like that idea, that there was more than enough segregation on the yard and I wasn’t prepared to facilitate yet another structure of separateness. Then I brought up a different proposal: I speak to every student in the class and get permission from them to break the class up into groups in a random fashion, explaining that it might mean they would be expected to sit with members of “another race.” She said if I could get everyone to agree, I could do the class.

Over the next few days, I began my process of consultation with the students. Our class had three whites, seven Southern Mexicans, two Northern Mexicans, two Mexican Nationals and nine Blacks. The seating was very tight so it was impossible to actually have a one-on-one discussion with people during class. I needed to make sure that everyone had the chance, as an individual, to refuse. I expected that if there was any resistance, it would come from the whites or the southern Mexicans.

The first discussions went easily. I managed to find people in the yard outside of school hours or corner them in the computer center when they were out of hearing distance of other people. After a week, I had 13 people on board but I still hadn’t tackled the whites or the southern Mexicans. The whites were a softer target. They were older men who’d done many years in

the system. To them I was an elder to be respected. Still, like the majority of whites on the yard, two of them had supremacist tattoos – one sported “white pride” in old English letters down his back arms, another wore an SS lightning bolt on his leg-indicating that he had completed a “mission”-some kind of violent attack on an enemy. None of the three showed even the slightest resistance, though they were appreciative that I had asked. As one of them put it, “we don’t want to be set up.”

I chose to approach the southern Mexicans as a group in the classroom. I handled the confidentiality issue by speaking to them in Spanish. One of them showed a slight hesitation about having to leave his usual desk which was located at the back corner, as far away as possible from where most of the Blacks sat. But the others just shunted his reservations aside. My workshop was ready to go.

I informed Mrs. Patterson and began the process of planning the activities and gathering materials. The most difficult task was figuring out where to start. Most of my students had no background in economics, though a few had some experience of business, both legal and illegal.

I began with an introduction to macroeconomics. Though Mrs. Patterson was liberal, I avoided talking about the “working class,” a steered way clear of ideas like the laws of motion of capitalism or surplus value. I found ways to talk around these concepts while highlighting the tensions and class divisions in a capitalist economy

I created a page and half worksheet on “Today’s Economic Problems”, describing the features of the current recession-job losses, factory shutdowns, housing foreclosures. I was able to type these in the computers, save them to a disk and have Mrs. Patterson print out copies for the students. I also used the photocopier to duplicate articles from the USA Today.

Based on the contents of the worksheet, I did a short input explaining the concept of GDP and how economists used this as a measure of an economy’s performance. I also provided some statistics on recent economic growth in the U.S. which I got from my only real “online” source, a copy of Microsoft’s Encarta Encyclopedia in the computer center.

Then I briefly touched on a very gentle explanation of economic crisis theory, looking at free market and Keynesian approaches to overcoming recession and skirting close to the notion of permanent, structural crisis, though not giving it a name. Mrs. Patterson followed every word, mostly nodding her head in approval.

After my input, I went to group work. I had selected the groups with an eye to diversity and distribution of those I believed most able to interact with the material. I also added something that had never been seen before in the GED class-flip charts and marking pens for report backs. Each group got their own, along with some tape to stick them to the wall.

I intended the worksheet questions to unpack some of the complexities of class position and economics. For instance, I asked them:

“If you were a business owner do you think you would be likely to favor tax cuts or government spending as a way to stimulate growth? Explain. Do you think a homeless person would share your views? Why or why not?”

The students carefully went through the seven questions on the worksheet and wrote down a summary of their responses on the flip chart. Though a few people remained aloof, during discussion the sound of the class switched to what I call the “activity buzz” the collective noise of people engaged in a learning process. I’d never heard this before in the GED class

The answers reflected the tensions I was trying to bring out, that different people experience the economy in different ways and may favor different solutions to economic problems. As one student put it, “it depends on who you are.” I concluded with a mini-evaluation form of the workshop and the comments indicated it was a success. I promised them round two the following week.

Predictably, things didn’t happen on schedule. The following week rumors circulated about weapons being stashed somewhere on the yard. We were locked down while the guards spent three days combing the grounds, digging and poking into the dirt looking for weapons or what they called “weapon stock” - anything from metal to plastic to glass that could be sharpened and used to cut.

Two more weeks passed before we got to the second workshop. This time I pushed the boundaries a little further- stepping into a role play for a workshop on rising prices. I began with defining inflation and the consumer price index, then offered different explanations as to why inflation occurs, taking care to include the “profit-push” inflation that never gets mentioned in the orthodox economics textbooks. As I explained it in my worksheet:

“Some economists argue that when companies earn excessive profits, it results in inflation. For example, some economists would say that the oil companies earn excessive profits which results in a higher price for oil and gas, thus affecting the prices for all commodities.”

This prompted discussion with some implied curses directed at the oil companies. We talked about ways to reduce inflation such as price controls or the use of solar power to reduce energy costs. One of the students told about working for a company that produced solar panels on the outside. He confidently asserted that solar power cost only half as much as electricity.

I then put them into their groups and asked them to read an article from *USA Today* on the rising cost of eggs.⁴ The author focused on the global complexities of producing chicken feed, typically made up of soy and corn. An increased international demand for corn for the production of ethanol, a popular fuel in China and India, had prompted U.S. farmers to switch from soy to corn, thereby driving up the price of soy due to shortage of supply.

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One student told the class how he had raised chickens in Mexico and explained how rising prices of inputs affected the selling price of eggs and/or chickens. Small breakthroughs were happening. Not only were students gaining command of economic terms, but they were grappling with the changing nature of the global economy. To top it off, some were even linking the material to their personal experience. This never happened in normal GED sessions.

Then I launched out in a bolder direction methodologically-a role play. I assigned each of the five groups a specific role in the contemporary economy. I chose the following: Iowa farmer, family of four in California, family of four in Haiti, the CEO of an oil company and a school principal. Each group had the same set of questions to answer about how rising prices affected them and what they thought should be done to address the problem of inflation. I also gave each group a background paragraph on their situation. For example, the Iowa farmer's profile read: "You are a corn farmer. Business is booming. The government is paying you extra to grow corn. Prices of corn keep going up because more and more corn is going into ethanol production. For you alternative fuels are wonderful. Life is great, you're thinking of buying a new Lexus next year."

While business was booming for the Iowa farmer, the family of four in California had stopped eating eggs because of the rising prices. Things were worse still for the family in Haiti who were spending about two-thirds of their income on food. Their main staple crop, rice, was going up in price and most of it came from subsidized farms in the U.S. As a result this family had resorted to baking cookies made of flour and dirt to stave off the hunger. (this example was taken from another *USA Today* article).

The questions asked each group how they viewed a set of policies. Each group answered in turn and almost mechanically. Some class differences emerged out but none of the groups explored their implications in detail or took note of how they saw the world differently from the other role players. I elected to take the role play a step further, constructing our space as a national policy forum, with each group having one representative. I gave them five minutes to choose a spokesperson and prepare their inputs. I chaired the session. I placed little name tags on the desks in front of each group to re-affirm their "identity." I also asked each group to draw a logo or cartoon to represent them or their situation.

⁴ Sue Kirchoff. "Food costs a major worry", *USA Today*, April 23, 2008

I began by announcing that the economy was in deep trouble, that we had a serious problem with rising prices and “we as the national policy forum” were going to decide what to do. I informed them that five policy options were on the table: removing the U.S. government subsidy for corn farmers, government price controls on food, increased food aid to poor countries, heavier taxes on U.S. companies to subsidize cheaper food for consumers, and developing alternative renewable energy sources.

The CEO of the oil company opened the session by complaining about the rising cost of prime rib and lobster. The Haitian family of four’s hand shot up. “You are just selfish, like all rich people. Don’t you know how we are suffering here, that we’re eating cookies made of mud?”

The CEO retaliated by condemning the Haitians “lack of initiative” contending that people in Haiti just “sit around and wait for a handout” instead of getting “off their butts” and getting a job. As he said “butts” he looked sheepishly at Mrs. Patterson. She smiled without judgement.

A five-pronged debate ensued. The oil company CEO was the most articulate in defending his position and offering economic explanations but the others contested each of his assertions. The school principal moaned that his cafeteria could no longer afford to bake with eggs and milk and they were considering substituting soy for meat in their hamburgers.

“You must come and see how we live, ” he told the oil company CEO. The comment brought a roar of approval from the class. The “principal” was talking about more than a school cafeteria- he was raising the plight of the incarcerated – the fact that no one ever came and really understood the conditions under which we survived.

At the end of the class, I got the students to sum up what they’d learned. A couple of men once again noted how economics was different for the rich and the poor. The student who had spoken on behalf of the oil company CEO group then said he agreed but the other students jokingly condemned him, accusing him of moving “out of the hood.” Even later that day in the yard, I still heard people calling him tycoon and Mr. Cheese.

Subsequently I did two more similar workshops on international trade and the housing crisis. I followed the same format: input, discussion groups, role play with similar results. My best moment occurred when in a mock forum of the World Bank, a white student speaking on behalf of Africa attacked the way in which the wealthy countries disregarded “my people.” For a moment, the racial barriers of the yard had not only been broken down by the groups but an exercise in empathy had forced a white man to throw in his lot with Africa.

A week later, that same student, told me that his family had come to visit him over the weekend and they’d talked about the housing crisis and foreclosures.

“Everything we talked about in the class was right there,” he told me, “ I taught them a lesson about the role of the banks in setting people up to fail. “ In the world of a prison teacher’s aide, moments where your work actually takes people beyond the confines of the yard and helps re-shape family relations are rare.

I hoped to continue this program of workshops but they transferred Mrs. Patterson from the GED class to the ABE. Her replacement, a retired military man who was merely in the classroom to add some more years onto his second government pension, had no interest in anything creative. His typical day was assigning his students some reading and writing and then playing games on his computer. When the students weren’t around, he listened avidly to the rabid right wing broadcasts of the late Paul Harvey. He wasn’t going to let my profit push inflation or even my Keynesian policy packages slip by. Besides, he was a military man. Sitting in circles went against his sense of order. A month later I got a transfer out of the GED class to another job. My experiment in learner-centered education had come to an end.

Conclusion

I took four things away from my experience in teaching these workshops. First, I clarified for myself that learner-centered methods with carefully constructed activities can enhance learning in almost any environment. The activities plus the relevance of the content brought a different energy, especially when the men immersed themselves fully in the role plays. The roles spilling over into dialog on the yard was evidence of the success of the method.

Second, as I had learned with trade unionists and social movement activists, teaching economics through connecting policy and problems with contesting models and societal positions can bring a reality to the content, even in a prison environment. As traditionally taught in most college classrooms, economics is an exercise in technical or mathematical models, like plotting points of microeconomic equilibrium or assessing the relevance of the Phillips curve. But as any class conscious worker knows, economics is fundamentally about power. The men in the GED class picked up on this almost immediately. As a layer of the population who rests at the economic bottom, linking that power to some concepts and terms of economists proved exciting and useful.

Third, at High Desert long-term planning in education was virtually impossible. While perhaps nothing seems more cast in stone than the daily routine of a prison, at the same time, security, the whim of job assignments, and racial animosities made developing a structured learning process very difficult. The best laid plans falter because of a lockdown, a shortage of staff, even a farewell party for a sergeant. Mrs. Patterson’s transfer to ABE eliminated my opportunity to experiment with methodology and critical content. I had little control over the learning environment.

Fourth, the greatest satisfaction I got from this teaching experience was breaking down the racial barriers in the group work by consciously forcing the individuals involved to make a decision to depart from the norm of segregation. According to my observations, for some this appeared to be a welcome “free space.” However, though this was my assessment, the underlying racial tensions were too deep-seated to constructively discuss our opinions about the dominant racial ethos. Our fractures of the racialized life remained temporary. Students might shake hands and laugh together in the classroom and I even saw some illicit food-sharing take place. But once they went out the door of the education block, back to “reality”, the walls re-appeared. And while there were some people who were uncomfortable with those walls, no one was prepared to go to war to tear them down.

So in the end, I’m not sure if ultimately these classes were a triumph or a mere temporary respite from the ethos of hatred and violence on the yard. Definitely they were not liberatory in the Freirian sense. Nothing directly connected this classroom to any social movement aimed at undermining the neoliberal economic regime which we had begun to critique. Perhaps including some discussion of the anti-globalization protests, no matter how cursory, would have been a small step toward a more genuine practice of critical pedagogy.

Nonetheless, despite these limitations, for me those sessions remain a cherished set of classroom moments, a series of inspiring exchanges where lights of awareness came on and the vast reservoir of wasted human potential that rests inside every prison classroom manifested itself in ways that neither the students or myself ever dreamed about. Then, just as quickly as an alarm could sound or a tear gas canister could explode, the classroom went back to normal, to business as usual.

In the long run, my hope is that “normal,” that “business as usual” has altered slightly for those students, that they will also remember moments in our workshops as glimpses of something better, as nano-indicators that they, indeed we, are much more deserving and capable than “free people” believe, and that we can overcome the racial barriers that divide. My most fervent desire would be that perhaps the actions of the Occupy movement made a little more sense to my workshop participants because of our class. Who knows, maybe even a few of them had left prison by 2011 and were joining the Occupiers in the street. I suppose that is a lot to expect, but critical pedagogy is for dreamers and fighters, not the cynics and the fence sitters.

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