

**Bringing Freire Behind the Walls:  
The Perils and Pluses of Critical Pedagogy in Prison Education<sup>i</sup>**

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**Introduction**

For more than 20 years before my incarceration, I was an educator. I worked as a high school math and history teacher in Zimbabwe and in South Africa as a college lecturer and educator/trainer for unions and social movements. As a white teacher in a part of the world with a history steeped in racism, I was accustomed to being a minority and had extensive experience discussing race at both as broad political context and at the level of personal interaction in an educational setting. The critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire<sup>ii</sup> was my primary inspiration in this work. This Freirian approach had been useful in a wide range of situations, from formal college Economics classes to organizational training for municipal workers with very low levels of education.

This was the background I carried with me when in August, 2004, nearly two years into my sentence, I became a math tutor in the G.E.D. certificate program at United States Penitentiary (U.S.P.) Lompoc, California. During my first few days in the classroom at Lompoc I felt quite nervous. A U.S. prison felt very different from South Africa where I had taught in a highly politicized environment, one in which nearly all learners had fully adopted a philosophy of non-racialism. In places like Lompoc racial hatred, even violent confrontations between various “racial groups”, was commonplace. Stabbings over drug deals or debts were regular events. In light of all this, I didn’t know how I would be received. While previous experience provided much grounding for adjusting to the classroom at Lompoc, I also had a lot to learn. In the end, I had to modify many of my techniques and teaching strategies to perform effectively as a prison educator.

In this article, I will detail my first year as a G.E.D. math tutor in light of my prior education work as a “free” person. I will begin by describing the education program at U.S.P. Lompoc. From there I will summarize my practice in the classroom, then offer some concluding observations relating my experience in the prison to critical pedagogy.

**Background on the Program at U.S.P. Lompoc**

The medium security Federal prison at Lompoc held about 1200 inmates. The Education Department included five full-time civilian teachers. Facilities comprised leisure and law

libraries, five classrooms (capacity of 12 learners each) and two computer rooms. While neither vast nor state of the art, the facilities were more than adequate. Security apparatus (a metal detector and a number of cameras) remained fairly innocuous.

The five full-time teachers focused on administrative tasks while the incarcerated carried out nearly all of the actual teaching. I worked in the G.E.D program, at a monthly wage of about \$50. Like all other tutors, I received no training or orientation.

There were 40-50 learners "assigned" to G.E.D. at any given time. Men came to the G.E.D. program for a number of reasons. A minority arrived with a desire to advance their education. The remainder landed there because a G.E.D. could yield few days off their sentence or get them a better paying prison job. A person assigned to G.E.D had to spend either the morning session (8-10 a.m.) or the afternoon session (1-3 p.m.) in the Education Department. Failure to arrive could result in disciplinary action. Repeated no-shows might spend time in the Special Housing Unit (the "hole") and/or lose privileges like visits and phone calls. Attending actual class was not mandatory. More than half of those enrolled just "kicked it" with friends or read newspapers from the leisure library. For those who preferred to study, staff provided textbooks, paper, pencils, and access to calculators and computer-assisted learning programs.

In the best of times, an eager and resourceful person could have come to the Department five days a week, received all books and stationery resources he needed and attended a focused two hour class with half a dozen other like-minded individuals. But the best of times never prevailed. As in any prison, security took precedent. If a violent incident occurred somewhere, everyone could be "locked down" (confined to their cells) for a few hours, a day, a week, even a month. On some days "shake downs" ( searches of cells and inmates) meant cancellation of all classes for the morning while staff combed cells for knives, illicit alcohol, surplus clothing, or pornographic books. On foggy days, morning classes were postponed until the fog lifted. This added up to a very unpredictable teaching and learning environment.

Partially due to such uncertainty, the Department did not operate according to any fixed time blocks such as terms, quarters, or semesters. Instead, the staff monitored the cohort of G.E.D. learners. When 8-10 men were ready to test the Department administered the official G.E.D. Results took 1-2 months to come back.

### **Background of Learners**

Virtually all of the learners at U.S.P. Lompoc were school leavers. Many never attended high school. A large number hadn't attended school for 15 or 20 years and had spent most of their life incarcerated. A majority had some experience of drug abuse. A couple of anecdotes might help elucidate their background.

One day I was doing a problem on the board which involved the order of operations. As I proceeded to the answer, one of my learners blurted out: "That's it. That is what made me quit school. That problem. I can still remember the day. 1983."

Another man had this to say when he arrived in class.

"I haven't been to school for 38 years. I've got twelve more years to do. I've spent most of my life shooting dope. What do I need a G.E.D. for? I'll bring you an apple tomorrow, teacher."

He never brought the apple.

Regardless of their age, a significant number didn't know their multiplication tables, couldn't do long division and often resorted to counting on their fingers. After about two weeks in class, one extremely heavy-set inmate aggressively challenged anyone in the class.

"Go ahead. Ask me anything. Six times eight is forty-eight. 12 times nine is one hundred and eight. Just ask me. I know them all." He was proud and confident that his ability to recite these tables would put him a cut above the rest. Unfortunately, he was right

Most of the learners had negative recollections of their schooling, particularly math. For many, solving equations or figuring out worded problems bordered on wizardry or magic. And for the significant number of learners who viewed themselves as failures (congenitally dumb, disappointments to their parents, burnt out dope fiends) ascending the mountain of mathematical success presented a steep incline. One learner actually told me that he wanted a G.E.D. certificate as "proof that I'm not stupid."

Some also seemed to suffer from genuine organic problems. A number claimed to have been diagnosed with ADHD or bipolar disorder. Others articulated a problem of memory loss due to excessive drug consumption. With many of them, I often had to repeat the material several days in a row before they remembered it.

In this section I have tried to give a broad picture of the context in which my teaching took place. I will now turn to my actual experience in the classroom.

## **Experience in the Classroom**

### **My Approach**

I began this class with the expectation that my previous teaching and learning strategies would apply. This generally involved: negotiating learning goals and processes with the learners, drawing on learners' experience, emphasizing learning through activity (especially small group work) and linking subject content with broader social issues and social change. I had to cast aside much of my orthodoxy to succeed here.

### **"Breaking the Ice"**

On the outside, I would generally begin with certain introductory elements. Typically this would involve: participants introducing themselves, clarifying the learning goals and the general rules of the class, outlining my approach to teaching and learning, and introducing myself.

Often interactive exercises, known as icebreakers helped to smooth the takeoff of a course or learning event. However, few of my students would have responded positively to even a mildly intrusive icebreaker. My learners came to their first class with very different baggage than most adult learners. From the outset they were suspicious, often for good reasons. Among their learner counterparts and tutors may have lurked informers, members of rival groups or gangs, and people with serious personal problems. The learners tested the waters cautiously. On the first day, no one wanted to "give up" their past. Personal information was relinquished in very small increments, not in one ice shattering swoop. If a tutor tried to set an example of openness, learners might have lost confidence, questioning why the tutor threw information around so freely. This issue was more sensitive when the tutor was new to the institution, like I was, and had not yet established a reputation amongst the population.

### **Setting the Rules**

I used a different startup approach at Lompoc. Prison life is laden with dozens of petty rules-stand up for count at 4:00, keep your shirt tucked in during working hours, no hats or shorts in the dining hall. Rules invented themselves, often made up on the spot for an officer to save face. With every change in policy or personnel, new rules emerged, usually without explanation or warning. Given this omnipresence of rules, I wanted to create a different environment in class. I let habits, practice and group dynamics determine rules.

This left me feeling at sea, with nothing to fall back on to restore order or drive the

building of a consensus. The only accepted rules came from an assumed convict code summarized in one word: respect. While this sounds useful, the definition of and interpretation of respect varied from day to day and from person to person.

A final note of relevancy was the absence of a sense of a collective political prison project. Beyond the notion of respect for each other and a general dissatisfaction at being incarcerated, there was no sense of commonality or group agenda. These were not the days of the Attica Rebellion or George Jackson. Those incarcerated and their advocates no longer constituted a significant social movement. Inside, incarcerated people were more divided than they had been for a long time, especially along racial lines. Dealmakers, confidential informants (C.I.'s), kite-droppers<sup>iii</sup>, and "bootlickers" abounded and carried on their activities with minimal fear of retribution.

Hence, there was no common goal for the learners. Unlike in South Africa, I couldn't invoke any form of organizational culture or count on peer pressure to draw an individual to school or encourage diligent study. A decision to engage in education was an individual act not typically motivated by learning in order to struggle for social justice.

Historical developments had precipitated this dilemma. In the 70s and 80s the Federal prison system focused on rehabilitation. Education was central to this approach. By 2004 we were more than a decade down the "incarceration as punishment" road. Education was an incidental, not an essential in this paradigm.<sup>iv</sup> This shift marginalized education on the prison agenda and reduced the options available to the incarcerated. In particular, successful G.E.D. students had little chance of attaining a college degree, since Federal legislation in 1994 had banned prisoners from accessing Pell Grants for post-secondary study.

### **Building the Teaching and Learning Environment**

On my first day, three learners came to the morning session. Two showed up in the afternoon class. All except one were people of color. All studied alone in silence. They hadn't had a tutor for awhile. My supervisor indicated I was to help people on request, oversee a program of "self-paced learning." In my experience, a self-paced approach was most effective with motivated, confident learners highly interested in the subject matter. This didn't match the profile of learners at Lompoc. I suspected self-paced learning would lead to frustration, alienation and further loss of self-esteem. Still, for the first few days, I followed the guidelines, spending most of my time reading while the few learners studied, chatted, moved in and out of

the class, or read newspapers. Occasionally they asked me for some assistance with a math problem.

After about a week I asked each of them individually about a more structured program. All responded positively. I held a meeting with them to propose a new approach. I outlined topics to be covered, proposed that I would do inputs, give them work to do, respond to requests for assistance and go over the problems on the board once they had finished. I also suggested periodic tests. They agreed. I then cleared this new approach with my supervisor. At least I had negotiated some kind of agreement with the learners, even if it was late and less detailed than in my previous teaching practice.

Once I started, things quickly began to change. First, the distance between the learners began to break down. They shared queries and insights on math, even on issues in the prison. My relationship with the learners also developed. More requests came for individual help and they asked more questions in response to my explanations.

My classroom had large windows in the walls (for security reasons). Everyone lounging in the leisure library could see the activity in the class. Soon a few of them, having observed a real class in progress, migrated into the room. Both afternoon and morning grew to about eight learners. This sudden "invasion" created new issues for me.

The most difficult challenge was adapting to the different levels of the new learners. In the early stages, new arrivals could easily catch up. However, once the class had been going for a month or so, newcomers would be far behind. I eventually divided the class into two groups. The majority followed the same curriculum, moving ahead through the main subject areas of fractions, percentages, measurements and data analysis, algebra and geometry. I gave this group most of my attention during class time.

The minority did self-study in the same classroom. I helped them individually. At times they would work together. Ultimately, I developed a rotation system where I took one group all the way to the exam, then picked up with those who had been doing self-study and took them the rest of the way. This worked effectively for the advanced group. The self-study group had more difficulty. They faced the distraction of my presentations and commentary. On occasion they observed closely when we did problems on the board, even if the material was well beyond their knowledge level. In the end quite a few of the self-study learners became casualties to this one room schoolhouse situation, drifting off to the leisure library or quitting education altogether. A large number of those in the class worked at Unicor, the prison factory. They were not paid for time spent attending class. Once the G.E.D. looked unattainable the financial

attraction of going back to the factory became more powerful. Nonetheless, quite a few persisted through to the exam.

### **Reflection and Changes**

I continually reflected on my practice. Once I gained a little confidence, I pushed the boundaries. I encouraged peer tutoring. I also figured out ways to draw on their life experience. One of my biggest successes was with probability. Nearly everyone among the incarcerated had some experience with gambling. The probability covered in the G.E.D. was minimal, so I brought in dice and a deck of cards. We looked at the probability of rolling a seven or pulling three diamonds in a row from the deck.. A few of the more experienced crap shooters volunteered to show off their skills on the classroom floor. If one of the shooters rolled a six, I asked them how many ways a dice player could get a six. The learners began to see the symmetry (i.e. that the probability of getting a six is the same as the probability of rolling an eight or the probability of rolling a nine is the same as the probability of getting five.) After years of rolling dice, many of them finally discovered why the house was bound to win. Some, of course, still insisted they could beat the odds because they had the "magic touch" on the dice.

Few other hooks were as successful. I did, however, try a number of ways to increase participation from learners. The most common was to get learners to come to the board to solve problems. A number of them did this, usually with positive results. Achieving even this progress was no seamless process. There were low points - plenty of learners became discouraged, even slamming their books down or cursing an x or y. Some would leave for a few minutes when they couldn't do a problem. Moreover, while I tried to facilitate as open an environment as possible, the internal dynamics of the group sometimes got in the way. Racial and ethnic tension was a perpetual obstacle. Since this is such a universal problem in prisons, it merits specific attention here.

### **Fighting Racism in the G.E.D. Class**

Racial segregation was part of life at Lompoc. There were strict rules, mostly imposed by the incarcerated and supported by staff. In the dining hall certain tables were demarcated for certain groups. Most of this was racial-the blacks had an area, the whites had an area, the Native Americans had an area. Within the whites there were certain tables reserved for the hard-core supremacists (Skinheads, Nazi Low Riders, bikers). No one violated these territorial delineations.

I was determined to have none of this Jim Crow in "my" classroom. At the same time, I wanted to avoid political confrontation. In the early days, I was being tested in this

regard. As a result, I was especially cautious not to favor anyone on the basis of race. When I let students work on their own to solve problems, I was careful to recognize people's requests for help in order and not to spend too much time with any individual. Since the majority of whites manifested some type of racist attitudes, I was especially concerned not to look as if I was giving preference to their problems.

Gradually the underlying racial tensions eased a little. At first, learners perpetuated segregation by choosing fixed seats. The desks accommodated two people each. When a new learner would arrive, I wouldn't say anything if they sat in someone's regular seat who hadn't yet shown up. I told them repeatedly, "There is no reserved seating in here, sit where you want." In most cases, African Americans sat next to African-Americans, whites next to whites, etc. Then the classes started getting full. A Latino would come in and share a single chair with another Latino rather occupy an empty chair next to a black. I would tell him to sit in the empty seat, adding that this was "not the chow hall." People began to respect this and worry a little less about it. Some hard-core whites sat next to blacks and Latinos and shared answers, even a few jokes. All of the baggage they brought didn't disappear but the environment felt different than elsewhere in the prison. I suspect my own apparent racial "neutrality" helped.

Moreover, in the end people did share a common struggle here: identifying that elusive a or b, remembering the formula for the area of a trapezoid. For some learners, this may have been one of their few prison interactions with people from other races or groups. Still, these were small victories. In an environment as volatile as a U.S. prison, one incident could undo months of progress. Fortunately, I never experienced such an incident in my class.

In the end, while some of my techniques undermined aspects of racism, they didn't open the door to more learner-centered techniques. I never felt comfortable breaking people into small groups. I refused to force learners into racially integrated groups against their will. I also balked at letting them choose their own groups, fearing they would revert to their ethnic prejudices. Most importantly, unlike in every place I had taught, I never reached a point where I was certain small groups would be beneficial. Group dynamics remained too precarious. The classroom was an island of embryonic equality running totally against the grain of the overall institutional ethos.

### **External Exams**

When I began this G.E.D. work, I hadn't taught a class linked to an external exam in more than ten years. I had forgotten how the *deus ex machina* of the syllabus worked. In an



external exam, a great teacher is one who can predict questions coming on the exam. I was forced to battle to find ways to prepare learners for the exam. .

Since not even full-time staff members had copies of old exams, I relied primarily on simulated tests from various textbooks. I focused on specific topics and time management, a serious challenge for most learners. I ran a lot of practice tests, gradually reducing the time allowed to complete until learners reached the actual G.E.D. allotments.

Content also had its complexities. At the outset, I adopted a survivalist strategy. Rather than covering every topic in the syllabus, I head hunted for the easiest. I ended up concentrating on bar and line graphs, probability, areas and volumes, averages, and fractions. The learners found these much easier than finding the equation for a graph or applying the principles of similar triangles to shadows. Through dwelling primarily on the easiest topics, I provided learners with a fast track to a minimal passing score. Most learners who followed this route did pass, though their scores fell within the bottom 20% of those taking the exam. A few even began to get a conceptual feel for math. Some even found that they "liked" doing math (imagine that!). About four learners actually kept coming to the class after they had passed and tried to deepen their knowledge of the subject.

### **Results**

In all, 50 to 60 learners passed through my classes. The small classroom size was a key inhibiting greater numbers. . When I had worked as a tutor for a little less than a year, the Education Department held a graduation ceremony. All of the men who passed the G.E.D. received a certificate, a pint of ice cream, some cookies and an opportunity to have their picture taken in a cap and gown. For some of the men this was quite an emotional moment, the culmination of a long struggle and perhaps for a few, a turning point in their life. One told me he would send one copy of his photo to his mother, the other to his son. "It's important that my son see his daddy in a cap and gown."

### **Challenges and Issues**

While a number of G.E.D. learners did gain their certificates, several factors inhibited the success of others. Institutional instability remained the major factor. This instability arose from several sources, apart from security concerns. The first was the role of the full-time staff. Their approach to educational management meant unpredictability. The most serious problem was not knowing when the next exam would take place.

Personal property and resource regulations also proved problematic. For example, neither tutors or learners were allowed rulers, compasses, glue, scissors, Scotch tape, thumb

tacks, or protractors let alone technology such as computers or tape recorders. Calculators, which were permitted on one part of the G.E.D., were in short supply and only issued for the duration of class. While there was considerable idle time in the factory where many learners worked, school books were forbidden on the job. One learner commented to me that he could "take a Penthouse into the factory but not a math book."

Despite these limitations, the overall tone in the class was quite serious. By paying attention to racial dynamics from the outset I helped create a teaching and learning environment where people could relax to some extent and focus on their work. On the few occasions when noise levels became elevated a quiet word of warning calmed the situation. During the course of classes, I frequently left the room to make photocopies, confer with a staff member, or sometimes force the learners to do their work without my assistance. In the dozens of times I did this, I never returned to chaos, arguments or everyone giving up.

Still, few learners had a work ethic to inspire. Only a handful ever took their books home to study in their cell at night. Most thought of math as a two hour a day commitment, like working out. On some days the class would lobby me to show a video instead of having class. I refused and preached a gospel of less screen time and more exercise for the brain. My preaching brought very mixed results from the flock.

### **Conclusion: Prison Education and Critical Pedagogy**

After initial apprehension, I found my way. However, the constraints were considerable and quite different from those encountered previously. By drawing on past practice of critical pedagogy, I built on learners' experience to make mathematical content more accessible. By carefully monitoring the learners' attitudes toward education, I was able to work with them to create a viable teaching and learning strategies. Crucial to this was an understanding that many of the techniques I used in previous education work would not be suitable at U.S.P. Lompoc. Had I implemented intrusive ice breakers or small group work at an inappropriate stage, I might have alienated a number of learners, tarnished my own credibility or precipitated racial or inter-group conflict.

The successes discussed above represent only a minute fraction of what might be considered a critical pedagogy. Drawing on learners' experience and awareness of the context of their learning are key elements of critical pedagogy, but they do not constitute its political core. Critical pedagogy is synonymous with the empowerment of learners relative to teachers, teachers relative to managers. "Education for liberation," the slogan most closely associated

with Freirian education, means power flows from the bottom up. Prison disempowers the incarcerated. There were no structures or avenues for us, as learners or tutors, to effectively participate in decisions about the education program, or interrogate the racial dynamics in the prison. In an era in which the buzzword was punishment, this was not surprising.

I could have embarked on a more radical course from the outset, abandoning the syllabus and linking mathematical understanding to a range of issues such as a distribution of wealth, surplus value, and comparative wage rates for different races and countries. With such an approach I wouldn't have survived for long. One of the learners would have either complained to the authorities, or a full-time staff member would have found out through the grapevine. The Federal System had long since figured out how to handle such subversion and make sure it doesn't spread among the population. In the absence of a significant political movement pressing for not only transformation of the prison system but also greater social justice in the country as a whole, there was little chance of swimming against the tide of prison authority.

In the end, I chose to follow a moderate method and save my more radical methodology to more receptive audiences on the outside. As long as the overall paradigm of the criminal justice system does not shift, there will be little chance of moving learners and tutors much beyond the confines of grinding inexorably toward a G.E.D. exam. While a G.E.D. certificate may provide impetus for an individual to advance or at least consider altering past criminal habits, such successes remain a far cry from the liberatory processes and outcomes at the heart of critical pedagogy.

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<sup>i</sup> I wrote this article in 2005 while incarcerated at United States Penitentiary Lompoc. Since I stayed in prison another four years, for various reasons I didn't submit it for publication. The piece reflects my thinking and my experience at the time. With a few minor editorial changes, I have left it in the original form.

<sup>ii</sup> At the time of writing this paper, I did not have easy access to academic materials. However, the literature on critical pedagogy which influenced me included both Freire and a number of other writers noted among the references of this paper: Shor (1996), Apple (1996), hooks (1994), Giroux and McClaren (1993). Apart from readings a number of colleagues with whom I worked in education in South Africa greatly influenced my praxis. These include: Nazir Cassim, Moses Cloete, Linda Cooper, Oupa Lehulere, Neil Newman, Dan Pretorius, Ighsaan Schroeder, and Dinga Sikwebu.

<sup>iii</sup> The kite referred to here is grievance form which an inmate files when he has a complaint. They are referred to as "cop-outs" and can be used to protest an action by the institution or to inform on another inmate.

<sup>iv</sup> A number of sources detail this shift, including Parenti (1999), Sudbury (2005), Curtis (2005) Gilmore (2007), Herival and Wright (2009), Reiman and Leighton (2009).