Swinburne University of Technology

Carolyn Beasley

Teaching behind bars: Challenges and solutions for creative writing classes in prison

Abstract

The prison creative writing class offers many benefits for the students and the instructor. Research has found that inmates in writing programs report improved self-image and reduced emotional stress, an increase in literacy, and more post-release opportunities. For the instructor, the reward can reside in the experience of helping prisoners develop practical compositional and coping skills that can lead to publication, performance, and outside study. However, the delivery of writing programs in a volatile, high security environment is a challenging endeavour that requires specific guidance.

This paper offers insights gained from implementing and maintaining a creative writing postgraduate program inside an Australian maximum security women's prison over a period of six years. After opening the discussion with a brief overview of prisoners' rights to education, it evaluates the nature of prison education and arts education in Australia. This is followed by an identification of the challenges of teaching inside a prison regime and an exploration of how these were resolved.

Keywords: prison writing, teaching prisoners, incarceration

There exists much literature on the first impressions and initial challenges faced by writers or instructors of creative writing, and of other disciplines and arts, when they enter environments of incarceration as teachers. These investigations include Osberg (1986), Kenyon (1989), Larson (2008), Ketelle (2010) and Parotta and Thompson (2011). Many of these, however, are first person narrative accounts that focus on the teachers' early prison visits. While the enlightenments, obstacles and strategies that these scholars share are valid and important, they represent what could be considered short term exposures to the prison classroom and, because of this, display a lack of understanding about deeper causes and possible solutions for many of the problems faced by the prison instructor in a longer, ongoing program.

Prisoners' rights to education

The importance of providing educational programs in prison has been well established through numerous writings, studies, and reviews. Foucault, for instance, maps the change in thinking about penal practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries away from the body as a target of penal repression and towards the idea that a prisoner, and his soul, can be rehabilitated through work and education ([Foucault 1975](#)). Evidence of this shift can be seen in records indicating that education was delivered to incarcerated in the US as early as 1789 ([Gehring 1995](#)). This movement towards recognising a link between education and post-release outcomes was formalised by a United Nations mandate in 1957. In this, inmate education is regarded as a basic human right enabling rehabilitation and re-entry into society ([Farrell et al 2001](#)). Similar encoding of this relationship occurred in specific treatise and laws throughout the world. The Council of Europe's European Prison Rules of 1987, for example, outlines that all prisoners must have access to education and that penal institutions must have comprehensive education programs ([Council of Europe 1987](#)). In Australia, this right is enacted at a state level by the various State Governments in the form of legislation recognizing the right to inmate education. The Victorian *Corrections Act 1986* ([Corrections Victoria 1986](#)), for instance, outlines that all prisoners have the right to access 'further' college education programs. Current scholarship validates the need for such Acts by returning findings that demonstrate education in prison reduces recidivism ([Johnson 2001](#); [Esperian 2010](#); [Stevens & Ward 1997](#)), possibly by up to 50 percent ([Tewksbury, Erikson & Taylor 2000](#)). Similarly, recent research suggests education is crucial for preparing inmates for re-entry and for restoring self worth ([Parotta & Thompson 2011](#)).

The provision of prison education in Australia

The reality is that while prisoners are legally mandated to be able to study, Australia's low population of 23.2 million people ([ABS 2014](#)), and consequentially small prison population of 29,383 ([ABS 2012](#)), means that the number and variety of educational and training offerings in Australian prisons are limited ([Semmens 1993](#)). The educational opportunities specifically for women are even fewer again, given that women make up only 7% or 2,201 of the prison population, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistic's 2012 prisoner snapshot. Put simply, there are more prisoners than there are opportunities to study. There are also political and financial restrictions on what prisoners can study. Management of prison education centres in, for example, the state of Victoria, are usually tendered out to state funded Technical and Further Education colleges or institutes ([Semmens 1993](#)). These tend to run vocational courses with good labour market opportunities ([Roberts 2011](#); [Semmens 1993](#)) such as hospitality ([Semmens 1993](#)), horticulture ([Department of Justice 2014](#)), fork lift driving, and basic literacy and numeracy ([Roberts 2011](#); [Department of Justice 2014](#)), rather than higher education courses. Specialist or higher education courses not offered within the prison can only be accessed by distance education or correspondence ([Roberts 2011](#)). Distance education was a plausible endeavour before the era of online courses, however the movement of most educational providers into internet-based course delivery effectively excluded prisoners, as most States and their correctional facilities do not allow prisoners to access the internet ([Department of Justice 2014](#)). Some prisons and their contracted educational provider offer distance education support services ([Roberts 2011](#); [Department of Justice 2014](#)) by, for

example, appointing an interprison staff member who regularly visits the education centres and assist inmates with external study or with the downloading and uploading of online educational materials (for example for Open Universities Australia). These interprison roles go some way to relieving the additional work pressures on the education centre staff inevitably encountered by student inmates undertaking external study.

This creates a vacuum for face-to-face undergraduate and postgraduate courses that are not strictly vocationally based (Arnold & Vigo 2005). Staffing limitations and curriculum restrictions imposed by the tendered institution that run the education centres mean that opportunities may arise for external providers to fill that vacuum by offering their courses inside the education centres. An external provider, however, would need to be invited by the education centre to deliver courses inside the prison. This could occur if enough students are enrolled into the same external, distance-run course. The external institution may be able to bring in a tutor into the prison to teach the students in face-to-face rather than external mode. In many instances, external providers did provide courses that attracted good numbers of prison-based enrolments, but they did not offer to send staff in to teach or supervise the programs (Arnold & Vigo 2005). The sending out of staff, however, was the pathway taken by Swinburne University of Technology in collaboration with Kangan TAFE and the Dame Phyllis Frost Centre (the state of Victoria's maximum security prison for women).

Benefits of arts education

While there are a large range of discipline and vocationally-based educational programs run throughout the prison system, this article considers the impact of teaching creative writing. Creative Writing classes should be seen as distinct from the literacy or composition programs that are offered as part of basic remedial education in prisons. While literacy courses do use creative writing as a technique enabling the practice of written English, Creative Writing classes encourage a higher level of self-exploration and textual analysis that move well beyond the boundaries of literacy training into the production of creative artefacts (Kendig 1985). The very existence of the genre of 'prison writing' (Larson 2008) alone demonstrates that writing generated behind barbed wire needs to be considered as distinctly different from learning to write for literacy purposes while in prison. This difference allows Creative Writing to be positioned within the Creative Arts rather than within literacy development. Once we situate Creative Writing within the arena of Creative Arts, it becomes easier to understand its benefits and challenges. Its application in prison contexts have been widely explored, particularly the social, emotional and cultural importance of teaching of creative arts in prison (Clements 2004; Flynn & Price 1995). Broadly speaking, arts education and practice encourages inmates to foster 'the kinds of personal and social resources that open avenues to further learning and underpin attitudinal and behavioural change' (Miles & Clark 2006, cited in Harvey 2010) through spontaneous and participatory learning (Clements 2004). Writing in prison has been found to fortify self-image and reduce emotion-related stress through learning the process of self-reflection (Palmer, Hafner & Sharp 1994) and therapeutic self-expression (Hill & Van Horn 1995). More specifically, writing helps create post-release relationships and connections (Harvey 2010) and community (Palmer, Hafner & Sharp 1994); instils a

sense of self-confidence in participants (Harvey 2010); clarifies values and practices responsible decision making (Palmer, Hafner & Sharp 1994), and imparts practical skills that are used in job interviews, resume writing, further education (Flynn & Price 1995), and even for activism (Harvey 2010).

The ongoing writing program

The program was developed when one of Swinburne University's online only Master of Arts (Writing) students was incarcerated in a maximum security women's prison. Upon learning of the incarceration, the course organisers in collaboration with the women's prison, arranged for the student to continue her education from within the prison. As the prison did not allow prisoners any form of internet access, the material, originally in the form of website-based readings, lectures and filmed discussions, had to be converted to printed materials to allow the student to complete the work. A number of other students expressed interest in the course, so the university sent a tutor into the prison to teach the classes in face-to-face mode ([Arnold 2012: 942](#)) on the grounds that the course could offer many of the benefits of arts education discussed above.

Over a five year period, approximately twenty students undertook various stages of the program, with five completing the MA and the rest exiting with the Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma or various units. Some students transferred to the state's minimum security prison and continued their course from there by correspondence. Three students went on to undertake PhDs, three students undertook further formal creative and professional writing education, and a number of students released mid-course took further units online when they re-joined the outside world.

Challenges encountered when running the program and solutions for resolution

Challenge: Publicity and publication

One of the most significant difficulties in getting the program approved and maintained was the basic incompatibility between the university's and the prison's idea of what constitutes a successful program. Writing courses measure success through graduate outcomes and the degree of interaction between students and industry (Kendig 1985). In short, writing courses want their students to publically publish. Prisons and their governing bodies, however, need their inmate writers to remain anonymous.

This need for anonymity is understandable. Despite the importance of providing educational programs in prison being well established through numerous studies and reviews (see, for example, Johnson 2001; Esperian 2010; Stevens & Ward 1997), there is often public outcry when news media and other sources report on prisoners successfully completing higher education (Arnold 2012; Osberg 1986), particularly post-graduate education and arts education. Concerns focus on the misconception that prisoners are taking positions in competitive educational programs from free, tax paying citizens ([McCarty 2006](#)), that the educational offerings are somehow less stringent than when offered on the outside, and that education, particularly arts education, is wasted given public perceptions about high rates of recidivism (Clements 2004). This resistance from the general public regarding prisoner education and the

resulting need to ensure that prisoner participant privacy is protected (Clements 2004), and the feelings of victims of crime and family relations are respected (Jacobi 2009), can make it difficult for an educational provider to gain the institutional support needed to run courses in prison. As explained above, writing course outcomes and measures of success are often informally measured by rates of student publication and public performance (Kendig 1985), so if opportunities for promotion and, in the case of creative writing, publication of student's work are very strictly monitored and audited by the prison, the external provider may find it hard to validate outcomes and to justify the cost of sending a tutor into the prison classroom.

Solution: Anonymity

A way around this dilemma is to anonymously present the student's work to external publications or to by-line the work with a pseudonym. Outlets could include the university campus magazines or affiliated publications such as national union of students or national educational journals. Anonymity serves the purpose of removing the likelihood of public anger at inmates being given a voice outside the prison and reduces the chances that other inmates will identify the writer. Writers' festivals are another way that prison writing can reach an audience. Festivals are a growth industry and each state, certainly in Australia, and indeed often each region and suburb, have writing-related events that are eager for works written from unusual perspectives. For example, Swinburne's Writing MA program arranged for a session dedicated to writing behind bars at the state's largest writing festival. A professional actress was hired to read works written by prisoners, with the names of the authors kept anonymous. This proved so popular, it was recommissioned the year after at the same festival. The tutor who taught the face-to-face post graduate classes in jail also arranged to perform the student's work at a state poetry festival. This type of anonymous public presentation can be used across a range of performance opportunities, including theatre (Gallagher 2007). The prison students viewed this as an exciting opportunity that proved their writing was of high quality.

While, due to anonymity, the students do not reap the benefit of a by-line attached to their work, there are numerous other benefits to public dissemination of their writing. Publication and performance boosts their self-esteem and confidence in their ability to write as they are placed in and on forums alongside outside or 'free' creative writers. This adds vigour to their motivation to complete assessments and offers the opportunity for their outside family members, children, partners or friends to read or hear their work in a publically appreciated and acknowledged forum. Importantly, it also lets them see that their marginalisation can be overcome and that they are part of a global literary genre commonly referred to as prison writing (Larson 2008). Publication and performance allows them to celebrate their belonging to this genre, the uniqueness of their experience compared to the everyday individual who is not incarcerated, and to project their voices beyond the walls of the prison.

The difference between publication and performance should also be considered when evaluating the best way to disseminate prisoners' work to the community. Once work is published, whether online or in print, the work can find its way back into the prison and so the author must be prepared for possible identification by fellow prisoners. The journal or outlet itself might find its way back into the incarcerated community as donated reading matter or through being used as an extract in a mainstream publication, such as a national or state newspaper. The author of the work will often

be easily identified by the other inmates, due to either the content of the work, the writing style, specific references within the work, or due to being known as a participant in the small cohort of the writing class. The intense and high pressure nature of the internal prison community means that other writing class members may be coerced into revealing the identity of the author. This may be of no concern to the author. However, if their writing is perceived to make comment on other inmates, whether specifically or as a group, the writer may be victimised by other resentful incarcerates. Content that suits this type of publication generally includes personal poetry about the loss caused by grief, incarceration, crime, stories about family realities, and stories that capture the ironies and quirks of prison. A further problem can be if an inmate receives payment for their writing. The landmark American case pitched internationally awarded fiction writer, teacher, and Oprah Book Club regular Wally Lamb against prison management when one of his prison students won \$25,000 for a story Lamb had entered on her behalf in a PEN writing competition. The prison shut the writing program down on the grounds that he had not notified them he was submitting the story and that the prisoner's win placed her at risk of extortion from the other inmates (Blint 2004). In contrast, festival performance offers a truer anonymity and the ephemeral nature of the broadcast means there is greater privacy around the author's identity.

Challenge: Prison work and communal pressures leave no time to study

Australian crime writer Shane Maloney joked that he longed to serve a five year sentence in jail, slip into its routine and be locked in his cell as a way to get more writing done (Phelan 2005: 149). This echoes a common misconception that inmates have long stretches of time on their hands. In reality, the majority of inmates are engaged in full-time employment within the prison and have very little 'free' time (Dodd 1987). This is a common problem for prison students across the world (McCarty 2006: 91). Typically, they work from nine to four each day in horticulture or manufacturing and dedicate Sundays to visits from family and friends. The prison is usually able to offer some students full-time study placement in the education centre that relieves inmates of the need to work full-time in other parts of the prison, but, certainly in Australia, these are limited in number (Hampton 1993: 19; Semmens 1993). These placement also have admittance criteria that require the students to be sentenced rather than being on remand, to have graduated from the assessment residential units into a more stable longer term unit of accommodation, and to have demonstrated a quantifiable commitment to engaging in full time study. Prisons rules, and government funding arrangements (McCarthy 2006) change over time and there may be fluctuations according to the strictures of prison management and government policy over whether a student undertaking a course offered from outside the university is able to claim the status and position of full time student. While the prison and education centres do their best to offer full time student status to an inmate engaged in a full-time study load, there is always the risk that a student undertaking a full-time distance load may still be required to work a full-time job within the prison.

For some inmates, gaining a full time study place is not the most beneficial option as it means a cut in wages (Hampton 1993: 19). Working inmates receive approximately ten dollars a day and from this income they purchase the goods they feel they need beyond the basic food intake. This often includes cigarettes, stationary, biscuits,

stamps to mail letters to their families, and lollies and drinks for their visiting children. A full time study position, however, often results in a cut to their daily earnings.

While our university funded a tutor to run face-to-face classes in prison, it could only offer one day of classes a week. This is typical of an outsourced program. A prison work and education day is generally divided into strict packets of time based around the need to gather all the inmates back in their units for headcount four times a day. For our program, this translated into two classes a day, with classes running for approximately two and a half hours. Most students in the class could only do one class or the other due to work commitments.

While the free citizen wishing to study often has the option of night classes, the prison education centre is not generally open to students past 5pm and cannot run night or weekend classes. This is a common situation reflected in the accounts of prisoners across Australia (for instance, Hampton 1993: 66) and internationally (McCarty 2006). For our postgraduate writing students, this meant any study completed outside hours usually had to be handwritten and then retyped in the prison education centre. While there is usually provision in the prison rules to allow inmates to purchase their own computers, the type and features of the machines are strictly outlined by the prison to ensure they cannot be internet enabled or be misused. As a result, the machines may cost considerably more than those available in discount stores and, even if available cheaply, are unaffordable on a salary of approximately eight dollars a day. Students, then, are restricted in their working habits if typing or composing on computers (Arnold 2012).

Accessing the education centre may prove difficult between holding full time jobs and participating in allocated residential tasks. Prisoners are usually at work in their jobs between 9am and 4pm, and if this is the only time duration that the Educational Centre is open, prisoners need special approval from their work supervisor to leave their jobs in order to type and print out their homework (Hampton 1993: 65). Depending on their job, their absence may place a higher workload on other inmates working alongside them. This may cause resentment and make coexisting in the confined social space of the prison difficult. As one former incarcerate put it, 'Being educated wasn't good for your image' (Hampton, 1993: 37).

As Waldie and Spreen (1993) suggest, education professionals must consider the likely impact of students' everyday emotional and social lives. This is particularly so in prison, where prisoners may not find quiet study time if they reside in accommodation areas that have disruptive housemates, such as a reception or new arrivals unit (Hampton 1993: 80). Just like the average post-graduate student in the outside world, when an inmate finishes work she must engage in the evening activities of her residence. These might include preparing, serving and cleaning up dinner; sharing the dramas of the day; resolving the disputes that arise in the typical share house; and helping those housemates with lower educational levels to write letters or legal documents. In residential units shared with inmates, there is pressure on all inmates to participate in community maintenance activities such as eating together, watching television, playing board games and group discussion of the day's events or current issues. Students may only get from the hours of 9pm to 6:30am the next day to complete their weekly readings, homework and assessment tasks. They have little, if

any, long discrete periods of time to devote to creating lengthy writing projects such as novels.

Some prisons may allow unit-to-unit visit times and while these can be an important mechanism for inmate emotional support (Hampton 1993: 69), they may also intrude on a student's study routine. In a community of female inmates where many are undergoing family court and criminal court proceedings, these visits may make up for the lack of support systems available to outsiders that help in times of personal tragedy and upheaval. It may be regarded as selfish of a prisoner to retreat into a room to study during such visits.

Prisoners may often face challenges getting to class due to the intense responsiveness of prison management to security concerns and inmate welfare (Dodd 1987; Osberg 1986). Disruptions to prisoner mobility may be caused by something as simple as a forced or long-awaited medical appointment, random drug testing, emergency situations, the more highly orchestrated movement of high risk, segregated cohorts of prisoners around the prison, and unit or entire prison lockdowns that confine prisoners to their cells (McCarty 2006: 92). The prison's prioritisation of these safety issues and inmate work programs (Zaro 2007) can result in students missing lessons, being deprived of material, failing to hand in homework, falling behind, or attending late.

Solution: Breaking down of assignments into weekly tasks

This absence of long durations of free time and limited time access to computers and printing mean that large tasks such as assignments need to be broken down into smaller submittable steps or chunks throughout the length of the course. The highly unstable nature of the personal relationships within the inmates' units of residence often mean that there will be evenings when they simply cannot get any work done. It became apparent very quickly that students, on average, would often only be able to devote the parts of two evenings a week to completing their work. This meant that the timing of the volume of work expected from the student over the length of the entire unit had to be readjusted in order to ride these ebbs and flows in student progress. An adjustment of this nature was not difficult and did not affect the integrity of the course as the same volume and content was delivered. It was merely spread out more evenly into weekly tasks to ensure that it could be worked on and handed in through weekly chunks. Overall, this had positive effects on the course design, not just for incarcerated students, but also for those non-incarcerated students undertaking a standard delivery mode as it resulted in a more careful stepping through of the creative-output process across the 12 weeks of the unit. As Heather Jane McCarty writes regarding the challenges of conducting history higher degree classes in San Quentin in California, 'it often means thinking through assignments in ways we take for granted when teaching outside' (McCarty 2006: 91).

The limited access of computer terminals and printing meant that at times students needed to use the first ten minutes or so of class to amend their submissions to final proof stage or to print. As a result, the classes were restructured to devote the first ten minutes to informal idea production, which might include discussion about events in the prison, prisoner's lives, or media that could be used for stories, articles or other creative purposes.

Challenge: Limited access to resources

A further difficulty is caused by restrictions on the nature and amount of materials that can be brought into the prison (Dodd 1987) and stored in the prisoner's cells.

Maximum security prisons have extremely strict rules about what can be transported into the prison. While a teacher working within or on a professional visit is allowed to bring in items, they are usually restricted to papers, books and selected pens and pencils (these may have to be transparent). As is typical with maximum security prisons throughout the Western world, there is no electronic media, such as CD Roms, USB sticks, recording devices or mobile phones allowed (McCarty 2006: 92). If these items are needed, special permission may be sought, but may not be granted, depending on the security rating of the prison and any disciplinary or risk alerts at the time. While the education centre in which classes were held was generous and receptive at all times, it was not always possible to print or photocopy the materials using their facilities due to the need for internal teachers to use the equipment at short notice for their own classes and administrative duties. In order to ensure the smooth conduct of our classes, we had to bring in photocopies of all materials to all students for each class. This is a common approach taken by external tutors teaching in prison outside Australia as well (McCarty 2006: 91).

Solution: Use of found objects, unbranded stationary and class sets of books

These conditions mean that the traditional exercises based on writing about foreign and unusual objects, food, pictures, music and video brought into the classroom are inappropriate due to the security rules of the prison. The teacher must be innovative with everyday 'found objects' in the education section and ensure these comply with prison security about who can handle them. These could include posters or paintings already in the building that are mounted as decorations, sentimental desk ornaments or cards sitting on staff desks or images from books held in the library. Writing exercises could also be based on unusual items of clothing that the teacher deliberately wears into the prison, for instance a trilby hat or a visually intriguing piece of jewellery. A further option is for the prison student themselves to bring in an item from their own cells or environs to share as a story prompt. This might be a photograph, drawing, handcrafted object, an image from a magazine, a flower or aromatic herb from the prison garden, a cooking ingredient, or an usual small textured stone. If a specific object such as a musical instrument or CD recording is required for an exercise, the teacher must give the prison enough notice to evaluate and approve the objects. This decision may take up to a week.

Provision of writing materials also proved challenging. Most of the time we were able to negotiate the supply of folders and stationary for each student so as to ensure there was minimal drain on the education centre's resources. Providing these at the beginning of the unit with the proviso that no more will be provided unless negotiated with the prison education centre became a necessity given the high demand for letter writing materials. The isolation of inmates from their families, partners, lovers and friends and the limited access to phone contact with the outside world (prisoners are only able to have phone contact with an approved list of people) meant that letter writing became a main source of contact with the outside world. Due to this, stationary such as pens and particularly writing paper, are in high turnover. As mild as it may seem, constant requests for additional stationary pose a problem for the teacher-prison relationship. While we regard it as a sign of successful teaching and learning if the student is creating a large volume of output, the provision of additional

or unauthorised materials to prisoners is a legal offence (known as ‘trafficking’) punishable by up to three years imprisonment under most state governments and is also a breach of prison conditions of entry. While the provision of unauthorised stationary may seem an inconsequential act, regular inspections of prisoners’ cells quickly detect any additional or non-sanctioned materials. Also, the prison early warning system on trafficking and ‘red flagging’ may mean that if a staff member or professional visitor is known to be providing smaller unauthorised items, they will be considered a risk for eventually trafficking more significant items and will be monitored closely or have their ability to move around the prison curtailed. If additional stationary and writing materials need to be supplied, it’s best to ensure that these are as generically branded as possible and not labelled with the university or educational provider’s logo. This way, if the writing materials are distributed by the prisoner for any reason amongst other inmates, the guest educator is not immediately identifiable as the provider.

Just as we viewed it as a sign of success when our students requested more materials to write with, it was a great reward when students requested greater access to books and novels than those supplied by the traditionally lightly stocked prison library (Hampton 1993: 67, 69). Issues arise, however, when students accumulate more than the allocated number of books allowed in cells (Hampton 1993: 54) as they may be required to store additional books in a prison repository space from which items need to be individually requested well ahead of time (Hampton 1993: 65). A solution to this is to provide the education centre with a class set of variously titled books that have to be checked out with a limit of one loan per student at a time. Storing these at the education centre rather than the library means that the titles could be rotated and new books swapped for old more easily as they were fluid resources or regularly approved items rather than donated texts. As the borrowed book had to be returned to the education centre before another could be loaned, the problem of accumulation of items in the student’s cell was avoided.

Issues in the classroom

Challenge: Creating a safe space for storytelling

The challenges discussed above mainly arise from dealing with the prison as a regime. There is also, however, a range of issues particular to the prison classroom dynamic that need to be negotiated. The first is the need to set up the writing classroom as a safe space (Stino & Palmer 1998). It’s been said that we ‘write to expose the unexposed ... to turn the unspeakable into words’ (Lamott 1994). Yet to imprison a person is to ‘remove their voice from the world’ (Lamb et al 2004). Many prisoners, particularly women, come to writing as a way of reclaiming some space in the world and to remind themselves that they, and their emotions, matter. The world behind bars is innately conflict driven: resources are scarce and bullying is a method of survival for a large number of inmates. Allegiances of friendship, power, and safety are constantly shifting. As a result, prisoners are often wary of each other and cautious about being placed in situations where personal details about themselves, their families, and their crimes may be heard by others and used as a tool for bullying or intimidation. This means that the standard class management and learning techniques used in the typical creative writing classroom are often not appropriate for the prison

classroom. For instance, teachers may find in the ‘outside’ creative writing class, reading and commenting upon each other’s work as a group is an essential technique for learning. This approach, known eponymously as ‘the workshop’, has long been a central tool in writing pedagogy (Donnelly 2010) and there are a number of different ways they can be run (Perry 2010). However, on the ‘inside’ where classmates are forced to live each moment of their lives together, criticism (no matter how constructive) tends to spill out of the classroom and become a source of conflict on the compound and in their domestic lives. There may, then, need to be less critique-based or what Perry terms ‘peer-review workshopping’ (2010) in the prison classroom and that which does occur may need to be on a volunteer basis.

In the outside writing classroom, a typical approach is to begin each session with discussion on an element of writing, such as character, through elicitation of ideas and examples, and then to move into formal instruction. From there, a contextualisation through analysis of sample texts often occurs, followed by the student’s own experimentation through practice using small exercises (what Perry terms ‘hands-on writing’, [2010: 119]), ending finally with the opportunity for presentation and discussion about the practice. Later classes may be fully dedicated to workshopping through peer-review, in which each student presents a complete draft of a work to classmates the week before for reading, with the following class given over to the critique and discussion singularly of that work (Perry 2010).

Solution: One-on-one consultations and the avoidance of performance

This model poses difficulties for the prison classroom. While the hands-on model works well for the first few steps, the presentation of writing to other members of the class would introduce an element of personal revelation into the session that may make members feel uncomfortable. If there is animosity or distrust in the classroom, sharing of writing may aggravate these conditions. There may also regularly be newcomers to the class, which can alter the dynamic of trust from week to week. In these situations, it is often more productive for the student to engage in Perry’s ‘hands-on’ space during which writing is produced in response to exercises and not shared. Student can be encouraged to talk about the process of creating the work, with its attendant ups and downs, and problem solve as a group without performance of the piece itself (Perry 2010).

If the class size and time allows, one-on-one sessions between teacher and student ensures the teacher can help the student channel their writing in a direction both satisfying and meaningful to the student. One-on-one discussion also allows open and recrimination free discussion about any elements of the writing drawn from the student’s private life. This technique is particularly useful for the many students who may have had negative experiences with reading and writing in schools and classrooms, or have only encountered writing for academic or scholastic purposes (Jacobi 2009). Sessions could be scheduled for once a month or once every two months.

Challenge: The danger of re-traumatisation

Prisoners are one of the social demographics with the largest rates of trauma. These are commonly caused by sexual assault, domestic violence, and events related to their crime (Fletcher, Rolinson & Moon 1993). Exercises that call on students to write

about their past, memories, or dramatic life events can be confronting and uncomfortable, and may cause mental and emotional harm to the student. As the role of the teacher is to help develop writing skills rather than offering psychological help, to force students to move down pathways that they find distressing would be a breach of our duty of care towards our classroom and the individuals within it.

Yet even by virtue of being in prison, prisoners have lived extraordinary lives. They have daily knowledge of the hidden worlds of the criminal, the abused, the incarcerated, and of the marginalised. They have experienced emotional truths that, if able to be articulated, are astounding in their poignancy and tragedy. Having spent much of their lives hiding these elements from others, they are now in a unique space where stories of these worlds are not merely usual, but are often regarded with camaraderie (Jacobi 2009) and humour. If they do choose to share their stories, the unexpected realisation that others have suffered similar experiences can give them a new determination to avoid future victimisation and expose them to new strategies for change.

Solution: Distancing and deconstruction

If students do wish to engage in life or memoir writing but do not want to reveal to other students that these are their own lived experience, or need to gain psychological distance from a moment they wish to write about, there are tactics they could be encouraged to try. These include writing in third person instead of first ('he' or 'she' instead of 'I'), and creating a fictional identity through which the first person could be used. Students could also be offered a choice of writing about moments from the past that were attached to good feelings rather than just negative feelings. There are also a range of exercises and approaches that can be used to break down any lack of confidence that tends to follow the prison student into the classroom. The most common of these is to show students other writers' first drafts. Letting them see published writers' initial versions helps them realise that writing is a recursive process, not a phenomena of birthing perfect words. Analysing and discussing these samples of initial works also aids students in building knowledge about craft and helps them to build and practice critical vocabulary (Perry 2010). Through these activities they can also experiment with techniques of critique on sample pieces before, if appropriate, graduating to workshopping the writing of their classmates. Key questions discussed could focus on how to 'remake' the work (Kamler 1999), such as what effect specific changes on the sample work might have, and how the writer achieved particular literary effects. If student's literacy levels or grammatical skills are low, using model texts from writers whose style is distinctly colloquial or experimental can remind them that an identifiable voice is one of the traits of strong writing. These texts could include works by Irvine Welsh, Maya Angelou, Ania Walwicz, James Ellroy, DBC Pierre, or Ken Bruen.

An additional tactic is to encourage one page pieces. New students are often most comfortable creating pieces of one page (vignettes, slices of life, scenes) rather than longer short stories. This ensures they feel they are achieving a folio of work over a short time. This is particularly important with students who have histories of addiction as they tend to 'give up on themselves' in difficult moments of longer pieces of writing (Lamb et al 2004). This said, instructors shouldn't be afraid to encourage the writing of novels as well. The writing of a novel or novella offers a larger canvas that lets the student play with and develop their skills in creating character, language, plot

and tension. When writing a short story, faulty technique stands out immediately, but in a novel and novella it can be hidden and give students more creative space to experiment and build confidence.

The diversity of approaches discussed above illustrates that the most useful tool for creative writing professionals teaching in prison is flexibility. Prisoners are not always able to attend classes, may be removed mid class, or may not be comfortable completing or able to undertake some types of course work. Pedagogical techniques that are appropriate one week, may not be appropriate the next. As a result, change should be one of the prison teacher's main expectations, and the ability to adapt to new circumstances and evolving student needs should be one of their skills.

In conclusion, there are many challenges facing teachers who attempt to conduct creative writing classes in a maximum security prison for women but, once armed with an understanding of how the prison regime works and how it impacts on students, most can be overcome. While prison conditions and the degree to which prisoners are able to access education changes according to political climate and public pressure, the realities of high security regimes and the effect these have on class management generally remain the same. Once these are understood and accommodated into teaching practice, programs have a greater chance of longevity because they are seen as working respectfully within the ethos of the prison industrial complex and so considered by prison management to be a positive program. Similarly for the student, the prison creative writing program is an experience with which they want to remain engaged because it allows them to draw their experiences and stories out of the margins and into the imaginations of those who reside beyond the prison walls.

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Dr Carolyn Beasley is the Program Director of Writing at Swinburne University of Technology. She has taught in maximum and minimum security prisons for over six years and also works to mentor former prisoners through the Victorian higher education system. She has been awarded national and university teaching awards for these programs. Her fiction has also won national awards and she has a passion for crime novels.

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