

Three Cs of Stateville: A Writing Center in Prison

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When I accepted the position of writing center director at North Park University in 2017, a rush of joy hit me for two reasons: (1) after twelve years of adjuncting around Chicago, I would work full-time at one school with benefits, and (2) my workspace came well-stocked with what Peter Carino calls “the 3 Cs of writing centers: coffee, cookies, and couches” (102). In January 2018, my second semester at this liberal arts school that enrolls about 3,000 students, undergraduate Writing Advisor (WA) Emily Smith started a letter partners project that would eventually lead to a dual-campus writing center between university tutors in Chicago and students at our seminary’s extension campus, Stateville Correctional Center, a nearly-century old maximum security facility that houses 1,137 adult males (*Stateville Correctional Center*). At a training session to prepare WAs and myself to participate in this write-to-learn experience, Emily cited the *Sentencing Project* to inform us of the 2.2 million people incarcerated in the United States with a “500% increase over the last 40 years” (“Criminal Justice Facts”). She also noted how a 2013 RAND study linked participation in correctional education programs to a reduced recidivism rate of 43 percent (Davis et al. 57) and closed by reading from a handout that outlined the project’s rationale:

to humanize victims of mass incarceration, improve writing skills of both parties, further incorporate North Park Theological Seminary students incarcerated at Stateville into the North Park Chicago campus, and encourage all involved to rethink the prescribed image of a good writer by breaking stereotypes of race, ethnicity, and levels of education organically. (Smith)

Logistics-wise, writing partners would complete a series of four exchanges throughout the semester, commenting on one another’s writing assignments in a manner that mirrored our center’s conferencing practices. A Theology professor who had

worked in Stateville since 2015 and currently taught the students we were paired with would facilitate letter exchanges. The first essay from my partner—39 pages handwritten, single-spaced, with 113 footnotes properly documented in Chicago style—initiated a written conversation between us that remains unfinished to this day.

Because of my first letter partner's prowess with his pen, I was surprised when asked, the following fall, to provide a basic diagnostic for students enrolled in the seminary's newly-launched MA in Christian Ministry program at Stateville. Students accepted into the program came from a variety of non-traditional educational backgrounds; some had earned bachelor's degrees through correspondence courses, for example, while others possessed only a GED. The accredited program emphasizes rehabilitative aspects of education in the form of restorative arts training for those working in ministerial contexts susceptible to violence. While applicants need not be Christian, they must enroll ready to write (by hand) 3000-word research papers. I was surprised again when 28 of 36 students who had already been accepted to this graduate-degree seeking cohort failed the diagnostic I provided, based on Andrea Lunsford's "top 20" errors in *The Everyday Writer*, the same diagnostic I use in undergraduate developmental writing courses. The writing partners program continued in fall 2018, but were there other ways our center could provide support for North Park students at Stateville? I applied to receive clearance to enter the prison, intent on teaching a few workshops. Support from the seminary based on a conversation with a student during my first visit inside led me to eventually offer a credit-bearing "Tutoring Writing: An Introduction to Writing Center Studies" course to 14 students at Stateville in fall 2018. Pre-established collaborative practices in this prison community continued to develop in the Tutoring Writing class with success both despite and because of constraints. While you will find no coffee, cookies, or couches in the writing center at Stateville Correctional Center, the Tutoring Writing class provided space and time for us to establish our own 3 Cs: collaboration through conversation sparked within a developing, beloved community.

FIRST CONVERSATIONS

Prior to the Tutoring Writing class, on the day of my initial visit in October 2018, I couldn't tell if my teeth were chattering because I hadn't worn a jacket in an attempt to simplify the process in the shakedown room or because I was nervous about entering prison. Probably both. After following an escort through a series of gated checkpoints and confusing indoor passages, we walked outside

until we reached the school building. I would have three groups of about ten students pulled from class, one group at a time, to work with me in a space big enough for three round tables that seated maybe five grown men comfortably. I figured the students would sit at two of the tables and leave the third for me. The first group of guys filed in; several lined up to shake my hand and introduce themselves. Others rearranged the space so that we had ten chairs around the one round table where I had set my notebook. Was it a bad idea for these men to sit so close together, at a table suited for five?

A plastic chair was pulled out for me, accompanied by a verbal welcome. I sat and soon realized that, due to the noise from the full classrooms on each side of us and the walls ending in open air a few feet before the ceiling, close proximity was essential in order to maintain a conversation. The genius behind this design aligned with higher education in prison scholar Alexandra Cavallero et al.'s claim that, in carceral settings, "material conditions demand extraordinary closeness." In our case in particular, closeness allowed me to use my notebook for "board work" so everyone could see what a semicolon looked like. Since students sat elbow to elbow, we could hear each other above noise from other classrooms and the constant whir of what I hoped was heat but was actually an industrial fan. Also, while speaking, we could observe one another's facial expressions. I was struck by the eye contact connections made and the intensity of laughter the topic "fixing common grammar errors in academic writing" generated. The sun snuck across smiles on individual faces and marked the passing of the next three hours that felt to me like thirty minutes. The experience reminded me of sitting down for a meal with family where the conversation alone leaves you feeling full.

On that first visit to Stateville, words were cut short by an officer's call, "Time to go!" As we were halfway out the classroom, several students asked when I was returning. I visited twice more that semester, bringing two Chicago WAs along. Since students were working on various assignments at different stages in their processes, during my second visit we offered one-to-one assistance, completing 21 conferences in 2.5 hours, leaving with names of students we didn't have time to meet with still left on our lists. One student I did meet with asked how his cohort could access more long-term writing support. We talked about the Tutoring Writing class I taught to first-semester Chicago WAs and the possibility of offering it at Stateville. (He liked that idea.) On our ride home that day in November, the director of the seminary program said we could run a Tutoring Writing class the following

semester. So, our North Park writing center team from Chicago evaluated applications from North Park's Stateville students over break, and in January 2019, I had 14 names on my roster. In March, I received approval from my university's IRB for the study "Training Writing Advisors at Stateville Correctional Center." In the 11 weeks from March to May, Stateville WAs enrolled in the course offered one-to-one conferencing to their peers during weekly study halls and documented 115, or 21%, of North Park writing center's total spring semester drop-in conferences. We put in writing a plan to offer weekly conferencing to a second cohort of MA students who would start in fall 2019, and we called ourselves a dual-campus writing center.

COLLABORATION BECAUSE OF AND DESPITE CONSTRAINTS

Students in the first Tutoring Writing class I taught at Stateville adopted collaborative elements into their work as WAs fairly quickly because many viewed collaboration as a practice pre-established in being housed at this particular maximum security prison. In his essay "Collaborative Learning in a Prison Context," for example, Stateville WA Scott Moore opens with the realization that "the majority of productive learning I have done has been of the collaborative variety, especially where the ten years since my incarceration are concerned." Moore then explains how conversations with peers in informal settings like chow hall before class each week become "premium" sites for co-constructing knowledge later used in academic writing assignments because access to resources such as faculty office hours or research materials is limited to non-existent. Other students in class explained similar habits of carceral collaboration established outside of an educational context, some of which include assisting one another in the law library with cases, sharing commissary resources to prepare meals, and networking to run non-profit organizations. Because the seminary's MA in Christian Ministry program requires applicants to have long-term convictions with at least 15 years left on their sentences, many students had already been incarcerated together for years, if not decades. Students started the class with experience in what they call "building." Stateville WA Rayon Sampson explains this term in his essay "Building with Someone" as "commonly used when cellmates bond or engage in conversations to get to know each other" and as a successful technique when applied in writing conferences. This ability to collaborate by what Sampson calls "building" does not minimize the fear and lack of trust embedded in the prison culture, but it does suggest that a history of teamwork pre-existed my presence.

My students also wrote about how the constraint of restricted

movement could invite collaboration. For example, when lockdowns cut class short or cancelled it, or when students missed class due to unexpected visits or miscommunication with officers about class rosters, classmates worked together to get handouts to absent students in different cell houses and to hand in absent students' missing work. I learned from my students how to use restrictions on my own movement as opportunities to collaborate. I needed an escort to class, the entry process could take an hour, and Stateville is already an hour's drive from Chicago, so I held conversations on the drives and in the shakedown room lines with other educational volunteers that allowed me to plan and reflect verbally in a way I rarely experienced with colleagues in Chicago.

Because they understood our time was limited and that effective communication could lead to successful collaboration, students prepared thoroughly for class conversations. I had (and have) never had more prepared, engaged, cordial students than my first term in Stateville. (Want to witness a class that does *all* the reading and never runs out of things to say? I can get you in on a gate pass.) These students were so eager to engage assigned texts dialogically that I misremembered Carino's "three Cs of writing centers" and told the class one C stood for "conversation." Conversing about Carino's "coffee, cookies and couches" that we didn't have united the class. A self-declared prison chef described recipes that left all our mouths watering as we leaned forward, tipping our plastic chairs. I drew perpetual smiley-face emojis on the chalkboard next to names when calling students to lead discussion, raising energy levels in the absence of caffeine. As an icebreaker before a difficult conversation on post-colonialism and queering the writing center, I was gifted an imaginary apple, and gratefully so; what would I do with a real apple that constituted contraband?

DEVELOPING COMMUNITY

Our class variation on Carino's "three Cs" set a foundation where collaboration through conversation led to the development of community. When Cavallero et al. point out that "the simple act of collaboration among teachers and students constitutes a tactical move with real effects" in an education-in-prison setting, I recognize one real effect of teaching the Tutoring Writing class: engagement of North Park's dual campuses in a definition of community that provides Stateville WAs the reward of visibility within a carceral setting and in the free world.

An interviewee in a study by Maggie Shelledy discusses his experience of surviving seven years incarcerated without a visit and notes how it is humanizing "to realize that someone else sees you." Stateville WAs experienced the reward of being seen not as

numbers or “offenders” but as productive members of the prison community. When a state senator visited Stateville in June 2019, students confidently introduced themselves as Writing Advisors. Taking the class and facilitating drop-in hours provided new reasons to be seen outside the cell as well as increased motivation to socialize, further building community between students. Scott Moore comments on how brainstorming conversations at chow resembled those in a “Burkean Parlour” because they illustrated communal construction of knowledge outside of censorial constraints of the classroom or cell house. Isolated in his cell, one student relied on self-conferencing; he read his paper aloud in front of a mirror and documented the experience in a tutor report so others in our community could see what he had done. WAs held impromptu conferences in intermediary spaces based on knowledge of the movement patterns of their peers, and they welcomed advisees from other educational programs in the prison. Students in my class who already viewed themselves as writers could inhabit a space where a culture of writing was embraced instead of ridiculed, as had been their past experience while incarcerated. I witnessed students-turned-Writing-Advisors care more about helping others succeed than their potential lack of self-confidence when conferencing. Shared language developed in the Tutoring Writing class, which included nicknames and a mutual understanding that, whether we viewed our North Park mascot namesakes as problematic settler colonists in the free world or slobs with poor personal hygiene in prison, in class we were all proud to be seen as “Vikings.”

Students in the Tutoring Writing class contributed visibly to writing center communities outside of prison. Stateville WAs created their own tutor reporting forms they submitted, and I shared this information with faculty who taught at Stateville via email weekly. Also, Chicago WAs got to know our Stateville WAs in various contexts. I matched WAs from Chicago and students in the Tutoring Writing class at Stateville as mentor/mentee pairs where Stateville mentees received written feedback on their approach to conferencing scenarios as well as two formal essays they wrote for our class. Two Chicago WAs visited Stateville to facilitate workshops; others visited study halls. Even WAs who did not participate directly in the project learned about one another because we posted bios and work by Stateville WAs in our writing center in Chicago and read from Stateville students’ poems at an open mic on our Chicago campus. Three Stateville WAs’ essays were accepted for outside publication. Essays written by Stateville WAs in their Tutoring Writing class were cited in final papers written by Chicago WAs taking the same course the following semester.

Reciprocal learning between Chicago and Stateville WAs and the broader North Park community continued after the Tutoring Writing class ended. Shelledy touts that “Writing studies needs more stories that move beyond the privileged spaces and practices of our discipline;” within writing *center* studies, I argue the same. One example of this broadening of community happened when a Stateville student’s contest-winning poem was read at a “North Park’s Got Talent” event in fall 2019 by the president of our Black Student Union, sparking a conversation about racism and representation that may never have started at a writing center whose main campus is run mostly by traditional college-age, white, middle-class females. Add our male Stateville WAs to the mix, mostly black and brown and middle-aged, and we approach the possibility of sharing stories in collaborative situations to establish the mutual respect for all students on both campuses necessary to continue building community.

CONCLUSION

All of the coffee, cookies, and couches in the world won’t make a writing center if the conversation, collaboration, and community aren’t in place; at least, that is what I learned from my first semester Tutoring Writing class at Stateville. The WAs in class taught me that the best way to maintain momentum in terms of sustaining collaboration is to hold one another accountable, which we have done by continuing to “conversate” in monthly team meetings during study halls. In fall 2019, Stateville WAs facilitated 15 workshops and 5.5 hours of weekly conferencing, and they reviewed applications over winter break for a second cohort of WAs who enrolled in and completed the tutoring course in spring 2020. Be it quixotic to expect all readers of this article to initiate writing center work in carceral settings, there are ways we in the free world can hold one another accountable to support those affected by mass incarceration. Writing center folk can actively pursue working with current education-in-prison and re-entry programs or simply be more inviting to students who endure trauma due to the incarceration of family members and loved ones or their own previous incarcerations.



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