

Street Literate

Teaching Creative Writing in Juvenile Detention

DOUGLAS GOETSCH

In 2001, after fourteen years in New York City’s Stuyvesant High School English Department, I changed jobs and came to teach at Passages Academy, a public school housed in a juvenile jail in the south Bronx. The previous June I’d sent a resumé—one side educational experience, the other side poetry publications—to the principal of Passages, Sydney Blair, earning me an immediate invitation for a job interview at the Horizon Juvenile Center. The interview, as I remember it, consisted of one question: “Why?”

I won’t go into all the reasons for the switch, but a key one was the desire to center my life as much as possible on creative writing and the teaching of it. We agreed that I would install a creative writing program, first at Horizon, then at six other Passages sites, located in lockdown and non-secured detention (NSD) facilities in Brooklyn, Manhattan, and the Bronx. I was to take on a program consisting exclusively of creative writing classes, to learn for myself how to teach these kids.

The first day, I stepped into a sixteen-by-twelve foot classroom crowded with a dozen black and Hispanic teenage boys in khaki jumpers talking and rapping at extreme decibels. Some marked me with an occasional sidelong glance—skinny white guy attempting to get their attention. I wrote on the board,

CLASS RULES

- 1) Raise your hand to speak
- 2) No side conversations

picked a random name from the class roster, and screamed, “Rico!”

“Yo,” said Rico.

“You just broke the only two class rules.”

“Mista, I’m in here for murder. What makes you think I give a fuck about your rules?”

They stared and waited.

“Rico,” I said.

“Yo.”

“You’ve got a point.” And he did, and I, for the moment, didn’t, and the noise resumed.

The second day, Al Barbarino, a retired teacher who serves part time as a staff developer, knocked on my classroom door and told me that the south tower of the World Trade Center had just been struck by a plane, and they now knew it was a terrorist attack.

“You’ve got to tell the kids,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because it’s history,” he said with a teacher’s excitement, and a citizen’s shock, “because it’s happening.”

So I told them, but they didn’t seem impressed or interested. And the towers fell, and later they became curious about Bin Laden, expressing fascination for the man who they had to credit as a terrifically successful “gangsta.” These are, the vast majority of them, gang-affiliated kids who hate “the government.”

Nothing about this setting, then or now, adds up to academic motivation. Had they been serving time in a prison (i.e., sitting with a release date, instead of awaiting trial/sentencing), and had creative writing been optional instead of mandated, teaching it would be *infinitely* easier. Add to the cocktail of hormones that all teenagers are subject to the fact that most of these are on meds, and roughly half are categorized as special-education students, having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, or worse. The average reading level is third grade, the average length of stay is thirty-four days, and they’re cut off from the opposite sex. Add gang tensions, fights, freezing cold air blowing from the vents, announcements thundering continually from loud speakers. Add the fact that a classroom, for many of them, is the place in their lives where they have felt the lowest self-esteem.

I wound up taking a hardline approach at getting them to do work. I handed out a photocopied sheet of ten blank lines enclosed by a small box, with instructions to fill the box with writing from a choice of subjects, or else get assessed for “Failure to Complete School Work.” (Assessment, also known as “taxing,” can result in loss of privileges for such things as commissary, phone calls, special visits, and a later bedtime.) This made them furious—they hate threats or ultimatums, unless they’re the ones giving them—but many of them, grudgingly, wrote. Marcos refused to write in class, but when he got back to his room (our nice word for cell), he wrote this:

MARCOS

Someone Who Ignored Me

Someone who ignored me was my Dad. He always ignored me when I asked him for something. It’s weird to live like that but that’s how it is. Life is crazy like that. I would ask him to take me to the park or something. He would walk out of the room. He’s a bitch-ass nigga but I love him. And he never looks at me either. It’s like he’s ashamed of me or something.

I penalized those who didn’t write to send the message that I was going to take the class seriously, whether or not they did. But you can’t teach with threats, and I needed to figure out some kind of positive incentive, along with a structure, for them to achieve.

Simple recognition helped a lot. I displayed their writing on a series of posters called “Writing on the Wall,” with big letters and some fancy touches. “My shit is hot!” they’d say, pointing and smiling like second-graders, reading it aloud over and over. When I published an anthology of their best work at the end of the term, it caused quite a stir. Teachers of other classes complained that kids couldn’t take their heads out of the book during their lessons. Juvenile counselors came up offering to pay for their own copies, which were being stolen left and right from the closet in my room. Student authors were becoming local celebrities—new residents were memorizing their poems. Nowhere have I seen the written word more valued and sought after than with this modest, comb-bound sheaf of student writing published in a juvenile jail.

But I can’t say I know exactly how that first wave of students began to buy into creative writing. It’s a bit of a blur, largely because they wanted it to be a blur. Every young person I’ve ever seen, no matter how jaded, is still eager to learn and grow, but here they tone down and hide that eagerness behind a defiant persona they’ve cultivated, lest they be branded “soft.” Some of the most reliable workers had a rhythm of strikes and slow-downs, so nobody would get the wrong idea about them. If I presented material that interested them, someone might say, “I’m ’a check out this shit... but just for today.” If I played a rap song, they severely criticized my taste, though I noticed their feet tapping. If I wanted to play some of “my” music, they screamed at me, though when they listened to the lyrics to the Beach Boys’ “Wouldn’t It Be Nice,” the leader (and every group has a “top dog”) asked me to play it again, explaining to the others that “The shit’s official.”

Gradually, I discovered the need for three key ingredients in my lessons: models, options, and rules. Any of these ingredients could trigger good writing. Models—often the writing of students who came before them—give them examples they can relate to, as well as an idea of what the assignment “looks like” when completed. Options give them a menu of ideas—as long as possible—so they don’t feel forced into a subject that doesn’t stimulate them. Put another way, they can dismiss a writing idea as “cornball,” and move on to the next idea. If they reject everything, I let them pick from a “grab bag” of subjects I keep.

The third ingredient, “rules,” requires them to include the skill elements I want them to build (e.g., use four of the five senses, use at least three lines of dialogue); or sets up imaginative imperatives which stir creativity (e.g., use a word you hate, or ask two questions); or gives parameters for the assignment (e.g., fill to at least the dotted line, and you can only curse once). Parameters are vital: these students are results-oriented in the extreme and need to know when they’ve accomplished a task. For this reason, they love haiku, where the results are mathematically verifiable:

Yolanda

For seven seconds

I closed my eyes in Rikers


Now I’m in a bag

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Writing assignments that "force" students to be creative may not seem, well, creative. But I took to heart what Frank Rockford, a science teacher at Passages, told me: "Find some way to make it into a game." It was great advice because academics is way down on the list of priorities for these students, below their next court date, their next visit, who might snuff them, how

much commissary they're getting, etc. But games—diversions—can stimulate and occupy the mind; and games have rules, a fact that kids intuitively accept. With a few exceptions they don't give a damn about grades, but they still like to play.

This is the end of my fifth year at Passages. I have published twelve books of student writing, including a 250-page perfect-bound reader entitled *Temporary Stay*, used at all our sites as a textbook. When new students arrive in my class (almost daily), I show them these books to let them see how well others before them have written in difficult circumstances, and challenge them to leave their own legacy in writing.

Over a thousand students have come through my classroom, had their trial, and gone on their way. With many of them, my goal is simple: give them one positive experience in a classroom, which they may never have had. I also keep in mind that the vast majority of these kids have been socialized not by adults, but by fellow teens, and have yet to be shown any approach to conflict that doesn't involve force. Teaching creative writing in a juvenile jail isn't just about giving "angry" kids a chance to "vent." It is a powerful and subtle way of getting young people to make creative decisions. And after twenty years of teaching this subject, I have an unshakable faith that good decisions on the page translate to good decisions in life. 

In the Classroom

Nonsense Exercises

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My students are often fearful of the wild creativity demanded by these nonsense assignments because the meaning of what they say is put up for grabs, and they don't want to risk losing control of their tough guy personas. So when they see a first-line assignment like, "She gave birth to a fully grown dentist...", there is an instinctual recoiling and a chorus of "Hell no!" and "Mista, you buggin!" But for those who buy into the nonsense assignments the results are entertaining and revealing:

JOSE

She Gave Birth to a Fully Grown Dentist

She gave birth to a fully grown dentist and once the baby came out he began to work on his mother's teeth. The mother was scared at first because she wondered how her stomach was so small. But yet she gave birth to something so big the other people on the block were so scared that they called the government because they found the way he was born really weird.

When Jasmine wrote "The Stranger in My Shoes" she was desperate to say—whether she knew it or not—that it wasn't really her who did what she did, that she feels "beside herself" in her prison jumper:

The Stranger in My Shoes

I woke up one day ready for school
but when I woke up someone was already in my shoes.
I don't know why this happened, but it did.
I wonder why she chose me to put herself
in my shoes. When she did this what happened?
She got into a fight, then got locked up,
then got placed in Bridges.
Two weeks later she had gotten remanded to Horizon,
with all locked doors and nasty food
and up to 13 girls.
They talk too much, fight too much.
Everybody makes themselves stressed out. They
don't eat, they lose weight, they gain weight.
But come to find out I'm still lost with
no shoes. I come on visiting days four times
a week asking why.
Why was this stranger in my shoes
leaving me barefoot on my way to school?

Writing nonsense gives these kids a way to be emotionally daring without feeling like they are "spilling their guts" about what has happened to them in their troubled childhoods.