

“Ophelia, she flippin’!” Teaching Shakespeare

In a Maximum Security Prison

LYNN OLCOTT Cayuga Correctional Facility

One by one the men sign in and pick up their work for the morning. The natural light of early day pours into our classroom through tall plexiglas windows on two sides. This is a Pre-GED classroom at Osborne School inside Auburn Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison for men, in upstate New York.

The New York State Department of Correctional Services assigns inmates to various programs, depending on need, including training and coursework that must be accomplished as preparation for release. Not everyone is going home.

“*Good morning, Miss,*” a muscular boy says to me, his voice soft. He takes his folder to a chair by the window. On the way there he touches knuckles with a few of the other students, in one of the signature handshakes here. He is twenty years old and his sentence is forty to life.

Participation in the GED program is mandatory for all inmates who lack a high school diploma or a GED. Inmates attend school, in addition to working in various job assignments throughout the facility. In prison, just as in society, opportunities for better jobs and better pay come with more education. Achieving a GED is essential for inmates to move up the pay ladder “inside”.

Other students are sauntering into the room. Mr. J. brings some books he has borrowed, tucked under his elaborately tattooed arm. Behind him is Mr. L., unusually thoughtful and aloof, perhaps because he sees the Parole Board soon. Mr. U. writes novels in his cell at night. He grins when he sees this week’s essay assignment on the

board. Mr. N., newly confident in math after mastering integers, picks up one of the math books and leafs through it critically. I like the curriculum for the GED track. Though I am an English teacher by certification, I love teaching math and other subjects too. To me, it's *all* English.

In the first several minutes, attendance occupies our attention. For obvious reasons, the count that I give to the correction officers in charge of the school must be correct. I ask about a few students who are missing.

“Does anyone know where Mr. V. is?”

Someone in the back says, “Drafted out”.

“Mr. D.?”

“Out to court”.

“And how about Mr. K.?”

“Locked up.”

And I ask, “Where is Mr. M.?”

“He’s coming, Miss. He’s in the mess hall.”

The men plunge into their individual work, while conversations still buzz at the fringes of the room. Today, we are doing practice questions for a test we will have next month. If these students score high enough in both reading and math, they will be promoted to the GED class, or the “room at the top” of our prison school. I move among the tables, switching cognitive gears rapidly, helping where I’m asked. Over the years, I have taught in both public high school and GED program settings. The GED test was revised in 2002, and it is a challenging exam. I know the effort it will take for my students to pass it.

Most of these students have had very uneven educational lives. While in our public school system, they somehow missed learning many basic things. In some cases, they learned, but they remember the information incorrectly or in a confused fashion. For these students to go forward, they must do more than merely learn new material. They must revise or replace much of what they learned in the past. As in any classroom, some students resist, while others students bravely tackle the difficult cognitive work before them.

A strong predictor of success is a student's desire to read for information and pleasure. Most inmates have access to facility libraries. In addition, many teachers maintain small classroom libraries. In our classroom collection, National Geographic magazines probably enjoy the most frequent circulation. The Harry Potter series is a hit with the younger crowd, but most other fiction can sit on the shelves untouched for months. Selected biographies often have a waiting list. Poetry is always in demand.

For those students who consent to learn, to read, to build new dimensions of memory, the results will translate into academic success and school achievement. I am reminded of a man who came into our room barely reading at the fifth grade level. However, he was motivated, and often took assignments and books back to his cell to work on outside of class. Within four months he was reading at an eighth grade level, and his math had improved significantly as well.

I glance at the clock, gauging the time left to work individually with students. The primary teaching system here is straight forward, individualized instruction. The correctional classroom features good diagnostic tools, and a spectrum of clearly formatted texts, coupled with a lot of individual effort. Does it work? Yes. It is the

students' own work that propels them steadily forward to better scores, better jobs and better pay – just like on the outside. GED passing rates are consistently higher in correctional facilities than in community-based programs “in the street”.

Inmates come into correctional classrooms with a wide range of abilities, and they often have negative memories of school. The twenty students who come here each morning have a variety of stories to tell. Mr. C. left school sometime in junior high. His reading comprehension skills are strong, but his calculation errors hold him back in math. Mr. D. has been working at the Pre-GED level for a long time, in part because he has difficulty in remembering material. Mr. M. left school around 10th grade. He is solid in both math and reading, and has a good chance of testing into the next class soon. Sometimes I ask my students why they left school. They cite a variety of reasons, but a sad and common scenario is simply that no one insisted that they attend.

Now they have no choice but to show up here every day and work toward a GED certificate. There are about 59,000 men and women in prison in New York State and approximately two thirds of them will be enrolled in one or more of several academic and vocational programs each year. Inmates may complain about having to be in class, but they all know that school is their best chance to master what they missed, their best chance to make their world a little bigger, even here.

“What’s a euro dollar?” a student asks, breaking in on my thoughts.

I direct him to our handy single-volume encyclopedia.

“What’s the name of that new planet?” a couple of students ask.

I hand them a copy of the recent news article I think they are referring to.

“Why do we have to do this stuff?” asks a student who has been with me for over a year. “Just give me the test, and I’m out -a here .”

I hope this is true. I hope he will promote this time.

“What class is this, anyway?” asks a student who is new on my roster and new to prison life as well. I explain the GED program levels again. We look at his scores together again. He is scornful, and wants to move to a higher class. I point out the testing cycle dates, when he will have an opportunity to do just that.

At mid-morning the men remind me that it’s time for the play we are reading. They do this in typical prison classroom fashion, by telling me loudly that they don’t want to do this play. Prison is a topsy-turvy world. I know that their resistance often reflects a combination of habit, curiosity and fear.

Mr. J. wants a different part. Mr. L. doesn’t want to read the role of a female character. Several students anticipate my next move and begin objecting to re-arranging the furniture for our makeshift stage. At the same time, others get up and pull the tables into the shape of a horseshoe. We settle in with our playbooks.

“ Why do we have to do this anyway? This isn’t gonna be on the GED.”

He may be right. I choose my words carefully.

“Other people know this stuff. Because you left school early, you missed it. We’re fixing that.”

One by one they read their parts, plowing through the difficult language of Shakespeare’s England, against a backdrop of razor wire and forty-foot concrete walls. Their voices give the lines a fierce new poetry. A fragile stillness settles in the room.

What do they make of it, I wonder? Soon they are telling me. There are only two rules for discussion. They must take turns speaking and they must stay on topic.

“This dude Hamlet, his father be tellin’ him to kill the new dude.”

“Gertrude, she don’t have no business marryin’ her brother-in-law.”

“Ophelia, she flippin’, man.”

“Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, they lawyers, right?”

“The king be settin’ Hamlet up. I seen that comin’.”

It isn’t long before our analysis of character motivation has broken down and the students are loudly interrupting each other. These men live in a high-noise environment and they don’t realize how their voices carry and swell. I intervene firmly.

“You right, you right,” they agree, quieting. For the next twenty minutes the discussion is focused, lucid, and profound. I am proud of them.

The clock tells us it’s time to wrap things up. The morning module has flown by. The men put their folders away. Some pass the next few minutes reading magazines from the library shelves. Others collect their coats. Again, the talking in the room gets too loud. I ask them to speak more softly. They take it down a few decibels, pointing out to me rather triumphantly that they are *discussing the play*. One of the officers has suggested to me that I teach *Othello* next. I hold that thought in my heart, happy with anticipation.

An officer raps on the plexiglas and gives the order to “go back”. The men file out, several pausing at my desk to say, “No school tomorrow, right Miss?” It’s an old joke between us. I assure them that I’ll be here and that they had better be here too.

Tomorrow we will finish reading **Hamlet**. Tomorrow is the sword scene. The men have already volunteered for their parts, and some have even practiced. Tomorrow, Mr. P. will stand and read, “*Now cracks a noble heart...*” in his majestic baritone. No school tomorrow? No way. I wouldn’t miss it for the world.