2 "Because we've done bad things": understanding *timē* in prison

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When I talk about teaching classical mythology and literature in a maximum-security prison, people tend to ask me the same questions: "Aren't you afraid?" and "Can they really do college-level work?" I'm practiced in giving short or long answers to both, depending on the audience, but most people want to hear all I can tell them. The one question that caught me off guard, and that I didn't know how to answer, came from one of my students. He said, "Do people think we can't do this work because we've done bad things?" There was no bitterness or sarcasm in his voice; he just wanted to know. The moment stays with me, and I'll return to his question.

As for the first question: no, I was never afraid. I knew from the outset that I wouldn't be wandering through the cellblocks, as some people imagine when they hear the words "prison education." After going through a TSA-style search at the front desk, with officers searching our bags for contraband, and then being escorted through as many as nine locked gates, I found the conventionality of the classroom unexpectedly comforting: linoleum tile floor, painted cinderblock walls, chair desks for the students, a big desk for me, a whiteboard, and a projector.

Still, I never forgot that we were in a high-security prison. During our three-hour classes, corrections officers patrol the corridor, watching us through the window that makes up most of one wall. The men are not allowed to come to class with pens or pencils; we have to pass them out and then collect them at the end of class, and lock them in a file cabinet. (We were supposed to count them, but I never did.) Once, my flash drive fell on the floor, and I didn't notice. I was lucky that a colleague found it when he came in to teach. If it had ended up in a student's possession, the warden could have shut down our entire program.

All the ways we are used to communicating with our campus students – email, class message boards, file sharing – are impossible. We have to distribute everything they need well ahead of time. When the facility goes under lockdown unannounced, which happens at least once a semester, we must quickly revise our syllabus, and then spend precious time in the next class reviewing it and reassuring the students. Any unexpected change makes them anxious. Our courses provide much needed stability as well as intellectual stimulation. So, am I afraid? No. Do I

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find the circumstances vexing, and do I always need to maintain a calm exterior for the students' sake? Yes.

The question "Aren't you afraid?" is, I suspect, a way of asking if I'm afraid of the men themselves. I'm not. Over six years I've taught roughly 50 men in the same maximum-security prison; only two ever raised their voices to me. In each case, they were more frustrated and anxious than angry, and apologized later; the other students murmured reassurances and thanks to me as they filed out.

Now to the second question: Can our incarcerated students really handle the same courses we offer on campus? Can they understand and write about Greek epic and tragedy as well as the undergrads I am used to teaching at an elite institution?[1]

Until I taught my first class, I wasn't sure that they could. I knew that the admissions process was lengthy and competitive. Prospective students must have a clean disciplinary record and the warden's permission to apply. The initial pool of applicants goes through several rounds of interviews with program administrators and university faculty. Those approved to move forward write short essays in response to prompts designed to demonstrate critical thinking skills. After a final round of interviews, approximately 15 students are accepted, a fraction of those who apply.

The essential difference between the campus and incarcerated students is demographic. With very few exceptions – and those exceptions, not surprisingly, were almost all white men – the prison students had grown up within what Paul Farmer (2004) has called "structural violence." Connecticut is the wealthiest state in the nation, but its largest cities are blighted by poverty, underfunded schools, high crime rates, and, of course, systemic racism. Many of my students had been incarcerated since they were teenagers. What could I expect from the students, given what I knew about their home communities?

Once in class, I found out that one of my assumptions was accurate: many of my students struggled with organizing their ideas in written exams, not because of some innate inability, but because they had no training. I taught several of the same students three years apart, and saw how much they had improved with experience – so much so that they were now helping newer students. Nevertheless, many of them were already good writers, and all of them read with an attention to detail that I seldom see among my campus students. The stories of ancient Greek mythology, however, were unfamiliar to even the most highly self-educated men in class. By contrast, most of our traditional students come into class knowing a little about the Greek pantheon. I thought that might be an obstacle to my incarcerated students' comprehension, but I was wrong.

Our traditional students may have read *Antigone* or *Oedipus the King* in high school, but those plays, with their clashing rocks of fate and character, show little of the capricious nature of the gods' cruelty and favoritism. I have to keep reminding them that these gods are not good, or even incidentally interested in doing good. In story after story, deities punish mortals guilty of infractions against them, and, as often as not, go on to wipe out their whole families and communities.

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