

Going to prison radically transformed my pedagogy. Over the last five years, I have taught and tutored at Phillips State Prison in Buford, Georgia. I worked one-on-one with students working on their writing for courses taught by Common Good Atlanta. Additionally, I taught a summer literature course at the prison in 2014. Working with the students at Phillips Prison, I was struck by the contrast between “the free minds of the imprisoned bodies” of my students at Phillips and “imprisoned minds of the free bodies” of my traditional college students (Jefferson Cowie, “On Lecturing in a Prison”). Students at Phillips were stripped of social illusions because of their marginal position, leading them to have a greater depth of insight and willingness to discuss topics that were socially taboo for college students. While students at Phillips often needed work formulating their thoughts, their minds were significantly freer than my college students. Since the students at Phillips State were ostracized from vocational society, they were able to develop intellectual agency apart from an occupational framework. My experience teaching at the prison reminded me not only of the liberatory power of education, but also the way contemporary education can lead to integration within the existing social world rather than critique.

Throughout my teaching career, facilitating critical thinking and writing has been central to pedagogy in my composition, popular culture, film and literature, and American literature courses. In the composition classroom, my goal is to introduce students to the practices of critical reading and writing as modes of critical thinking. My composition students develop critical thinking skills through investigating specific course themes in depth rather than wide learning. In my themed composition courses, I encourage students to focus on a specific issue or range of experiences in order to understand the historical context surrounding the social issues in these thematic focuses. In my popular culture course, we worked together to historicize contemporary developments in popular culture in order to restore the erasure of history pervasive in contemporary popular culture. My American literature class, we utilized the focus of “Individual, Society, and Community in American Literature” to move past the conventional focus of American literature as a struggle between the individual and society and introduce the third term of community as a mode of interrupting this dialectical relationship and instead understand historical and contemporary American literature as a negotiation between these terms. In my film course, we focused on epistemology as way to understand the evolution of American detective fiction and film, enabling students to understand the history of the genre as well as its ideological preoccupations.

I believe that the value of education is its ability to resist dominant modes of thought and to assist students in developing critical thinking and writing skills. I also believe that the ability to analyze texts and arguments is intimately tied to student’s ability to write their own. I balance engagement with students’ ideological presumptions with the practice of critical thinking and writing that questions their assumed knowledge. It is essential for students to understand that texts and arguments are constructed, can be taken apart, and do not hold any inherent, naturalized quality. Furthermore, they can also construct texts in like manner. By giving them the space to develop the intellectual and educational skills essential for critical thinking, students learn that writing and reading can push against preexisting societal boundaries; thus, they are better able to engage their thoughts, ideas, and actions to create a better future.