

The Ex-Inmate as Correctional Educator: A Personal View

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Teaching in a correctional facility: invigorating, exciting, challenging ... and yes, frustrating, taxing, draining, and scary at times. Like Forrest Gump's box of chocolates, you never really know what you're going to get, but perhaps this also adds to the daily motivation of teaching inmates. It creates enthusiasm and breeds addiction to the profession. And it changes you forever.

But let me add one more ingredient to this equation that perhaps offers me an additional perspective: I am an ex-inmate who is also a correctional educator.

The nature of my crime is unimportant; it was long ago and far away. Yet because I have now and always will have "ex-inmate" as part of my permanent makeup, it allows me immediate acceptance and legitimacy by the inmates (and ex-inmates); and it tells them that I perhaps better understand and know them than teachers who have never spent a day as "Inmate # Whomever." But don't think for a minute that I will have it easier – au contraire, au contraire.

For the ex-inmate as correctional educator walks on very thin ice if he or she believes that the "badge" of being an ex-inmate will carry the class. Far from it. Indeed, the inmates are there to learn, and while I may be a bit more privy to their schemes, their lingo, their fronting, and their regimen, they are, in the end, students: to learn and learn well so they won't return to prison is the ultimate reason of their presence in the classroom. So I must wear "ex-inmate" softly and silently, reminding the students of its power and knowledge only when necessary.

Expertise in my subject area (as for any correctional educator) is crucial; without it, the inmates would soon know that I am but a fake, a cardboard cutout. As a teacher, my respect would be nil; as an ex-inmate, I would be laughed at. (For those who are placed in a class yet do not have its subject area as your specialty: read about it, learn as much as you can about before you put your first toe in the classroom. If not, you'll most surely drown.) And beyond my grasp of the subject, it is important that I wrap it in a cloak of enthusiasm sprinkled with humor and theatrics. I tie this all up in sincerity – deep, unmitigated, from the heart sincerity. Now I am a correctional education teacher, now I can make a positive difference in their lives.

Each teacher, of course, is different. Personality. Personal interests. Life experiences. Goals. These are all used at various time – either consciously or subconsciously – as many teacher aides: relating, corresponding, effusing, connecting, illustrating, highlighting, and enhancing points and ideas. I do the same. Then, as mentioned, I use the power and knowledge of my being an ex-inmate to further take their lives into what I call reality-based education: stripping away the veneer of lies and machismo (male or female), pushing heads up close to the slings and misfortunes and not-always-great-experiences of life after prison, licking the dirty walls and cruel environment of incarceration for all its good and antidotes against its evils, getting ready for the hard slap in the face of freedom. One who has been an inmate, one who is an ex-inmate can so finely pinpoint this information, can so bring it up close and personal to those sitting in prison classrooms.

This information cannot be learned from books or the internet or television ... it will never be fully absorbed if one teaches in a prison 20 years ... conversations with ex-inmates will never yield enough for a full digestion of the inmate / ex-inmate experience. As a correctional educator, this

was not an edge I sought out, not one I ever thought about in my years behind steel bars. Yet years later, reaching into all I could find to make my teaching efforts the best possible I embraced my experience as an inmate and ex-inmate. It was me, it is me, it always will be me; rather than place it in a memory jar to grow old and fade, I gladly keep it alive and nurture it so that those I teach may better learn from the inmate and ex-inmate experiences I own.

Does this make me a better teacher than he or she who never were incarcerated? Never. They, like I, have shadow and isolated experiences to draw from that I will never hold, never come close to touching. And many use it wisely to open minds and create sparks of excitement for learning. Yet my being an ex-inmate and teaching in a correctional facility to inmates blends well, blends naturally; and at times I believe it allows my teaching foundation to be a bit stronger, my focus to be a few degrees clearer, my understanding of the student to be a tad deeper.

I truly enjoy being a correctional educator, and "been there, done that" does, it seems, make the profession of correctional educator easier to embrace ... for me.