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# Teaching Philosophy to Inmates Part II: Moral Development and Teaching Ethics in Prisons

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# **Teaching Philosophy to Inmates**

## **Part II: Moral Development and Teaching Ethics in Prisons**

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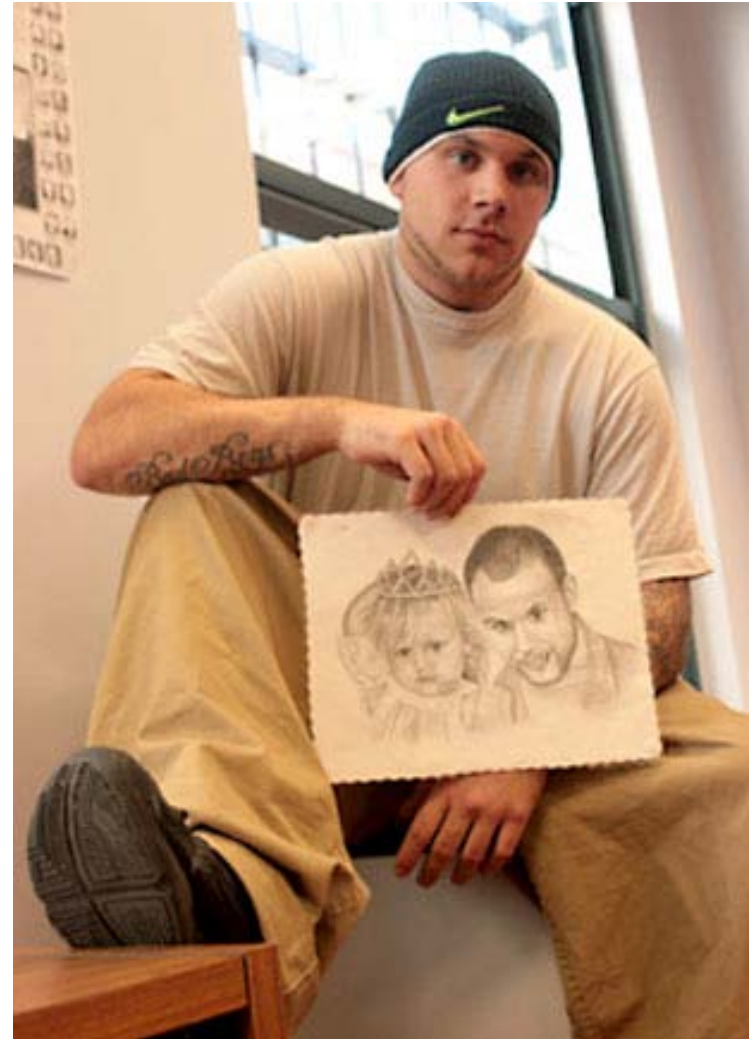
Fayetteville State University

# Overview of Workshop Portion

- Why Teach Philosophy In Prison?
- Opportunities for Teaching Ethics in Prison
- Exercise 1: Pedagogical Goals
- Challenges and Conditions for Teaching in Prison
- Exercise 2: Moral and Educational Theory  
Commitments
- Key Findings and Claims in Prison Pedagogy  
Literature
- Exercise 3: Fruitful Content
- Lessons of Experience with My Prison Students
- Resources and Q and A

# Why Teach Philosophy In Prison?

- A Variety of Answers
- “There’s two good things in this prison: Religion and Education. Everything else is bad.”
- Involving oneself in positive transformation of inmates
  - Recidivism
  - Rehabilitation
- Personal/professional growth of instructors
- Service to Community and to those in prison/affected by imprisonment



# Opportunities for Teaching Ethics in Prison

- Some States: Current Prison Education by Universities
  - Degree Programs
  - Course Programs
- Initiatives by Institutions
  - Bard Prison Initiative
- Affiliating with Volunteer Programs or Groups
  - Character-based/faith-based programs
- Independent Initiatives
  - E.g. St. Anselm College professor teaching Plato in Women's Prison

## Classes Taught by Author with Moral Philosophy Content

- Moral Philosophy Classes
  - Ethics
  - Political Philosophy
- History of Philosophy Classes
- Religious Studies Classes
- Introduction to Philosophy

# Exercise 1: Pedagogical Goals

- What are your two most important goals in teaching Ethics content in courses?
  - 1.
  - 2.
- What are two things you would you want Prison students to bring away from Ethics content?
  - 1.
  - 2.

# The “Captive Audience”?



- Instructors entering and engaging a very different moral environment
- The Inmate’s Institution
- Many challenges that inhibit or interfere with education
- Need for instructors to adopt dialectical approach
  - reflection on goals
  - course design
  - engaging practices

# Conditions and Challenges for Teaching Ethics in the Prison Educational Environment



- Correctional Institution
- Structuring of Time
- Educational Spaces and Resources
- Lives of Prison Students
- Educational Preparation of Students
- Moral Development of Students
- Instructors Themselves



# The Correctional Institution Setting

- Education must be compatible with good order of institution
  - Institutions more or less receptive to/supportive of educators coming in from outside
  - Prison staff have their own attitudes towards inmate education
- Time
  - Scheduling of classes: typically weekly, seminar format
  - Unpredictable Interruptions, lockdowns, counts
- Educational Spaces and Resources
  - Classrooms
  - Libraries
  - Computer Labs
  - Restrictions on what resources may be used

# The Students

- Their Lives
  - Many have jobs in the Prison
  - Noisy cell blocks/ dorms, make it difficult to read/study
- Educational Preparation
  - Many had deficient education prior to prison
  - Many earned GEDs in prison
- Moral Development
  - Lack of moral development connected with crime
  - Prison environment on its own does not tend to promote moral development, action, community, or knowledge
  - Many students entering classes at low (1-2 Kohlberg) level of moral development

# Instructors: Questions for Reflection

- What sort of obstacles might instructors themselves bring to prison education?
- What sort of preconceptions about prisoners? About prisons? About prison staff?
- What sorts of preferred pedagogy might pose problems?
- Prisoners tend to have little identification with, and much cynicism about, prevailing liberal/ progressive assumptions/ attitudes of many academics

# Exercise 2: Moral and Educational Theory Commitments

- None of us lack preferred moral and educational theories
- Our educational goals, commitments, and modes of evaluation are tied to our theories
- 2 open-ended questions to reflect on
  - What are my most basic moral commitments or values, and what moral theory best approximates or embodies them?
  - What are my most basic educational commitments, and what educational theory best approximates or embodies them?
- Another Question: how does my moral theory connect with my educational theory?

## Key Findings and Claims in Prison Pedagogy Literature: Possibilities for Moral/ Educational Theory

- Two Extreme Ends of the Spectrum
  - Prison Education as Conforming Individual to Moral Norms and Institution
  - Hermeneutics of (excessive and onesided) Suspicion
- Bard Prison Initiative (discussed in Karpowitz )
  - Focus on texts and contexts instead of just prison experience
  - Focus on structure instead of autonomous individual
  - Focus on critique of concepts instead of reinforcing norms

# Possibilities for Moral/ Educational Theory (ctd.)

- Kohlberg's Moral Development Theory
  - Now classic theory dealing with moral development
  - Articulates useful scale for moral development, which focuses on the moral reasoning involved in agents' actions
  - Students develop through engagement, reflection processing conflicts between perspectives
  - Kohlberg actually writes about prison environments
- Steven Duguid
  - Theoretician/ Practitioner/ Administrator working in Canadian Prison System
  - Incorporates and supplements Kohlberg's insights with variety of reflections from classical and contemporary philosophy
- Other useful supplements for Kohlberg's theory
  - Ethics of Care and other similar (e.g. Marcellian) approaches
  - Neo-Aristotelean and other traditional moral theoretical approaches

# Process and Outcomes in Moral Development Theory

- How should outcomes be framed?
  - Moral knowledge or moral behavior?
  - Education or rehabilitation?
- General assumptions (Deguid)
  - Prison students have certain deficits or underdevelopments placing them at Kohlberg Levels 1 or 2
    - Some are cognitive: have to do with knowledge, concepts, understanding
    - Some are emotional/affective
    - Some are moral: can be understood in terms of moral categories
  - Recognition of relevance of socio-economic and present environmental factors (i.e. prison context) in deficits
  - Educators are not there to change prisoners as objects
  - Educators assist prisoners develop as subjects through natural but stunted process of human growth in moral development
  - Need to proceed through and consolidate moral development stages sequentially: **reasoning at each of stages 3-6**

# Key Findings and Claims: Effectively Promoting Moral Development

- What works? What is needed?
- Education adding different space and practice to existing ones
  - Neither oppositional to nor co-opted by prison system
  - Incorporating and reflecting on students experiences and environment
  - Offering students involvement and identifications not only with community outside prison but also cultural heritages
- Kohlberg/Deguid: issue of “Just Community”
- Deguid: broad-based humanities disciplines bring together cognitive development and moral reasoning



# Effectively Promoting Moral Development (ctd.)

- Instructors as consistent cognitive, emotional, and moral models
- Cognitive development in terms of learning, thinking about, applying, understanding ethical theories, concepts, texts
- Continued self-reflection on part of students on their values, choices, behavior
- Experimentation, imaginative and dramatic role-taking, engagement with peers, working through conflicts
- Exposure to, exploration of, evaluation of others' moral reasoning
- Practice in carrying out and articulating moral reasoning

# Additional Reflections from my Experience

- Fundamental problem for prison classes: **Time**
  - Much of the learning has to take place outside of classroom in prison environment
  - Learning must be cumulative, structured, comparative, integrative
  - Course design: assignments and activities in classes should have out of class components, keeping students engaged between classes
  - Planning ahead for recurring teachable moments
    - Tropes of relativism, egoism
    - Discussions of higher and lower stages of moral reasoning applying ethical theories
  - Flexibility: being ready to seize opportunities for further exploration and for larger projects

# Additional Reflections (ctd.)

- Stressing objective over subjective
  - Mastery of fundamental knowledge: positions, concepts, theories, distinctions: “learning the map”
  - Stressing developing/exhibiting understanding over agreement/ simply having the “right” answer
  - Gradually developing comfort with multiple perspectives
- Tying-in ethical content from Philosophy classes
  - Knowing the curriculum: what is going on in other instructors’ classes
  - Developing connections with prison communities and programs
- Providing conceptual structure for moral stances and reasoning: rubrics, scales, Kohlbergian stages

# What Content did Prisoners find most engaging?

- Socratic Dialogues: Apology, Crito, Republic, Symposium
- Hobbes: state(s) of nature, the social contract and authority
- Virtue Ethics: determining what counts as virtues and vices, how emotions (particularly anger) can be matter for virtues and vices
- Utilitarianism: discussions involving actual calculations carried out by students
- Thomistic Principle of Double Effect: how it is applied, broader issue of how to properly describe species of moral acts
- Typical reductionist presentation of Divine Command Theory vs. Religiously derived Ethical Codes and Reasoning
- Aristotelian discussions of voluntary and involuntary, moral choice (prohairesis)
- Max Scheler's discussions of suffering and hierarchies of value
- Josiah Royce's discussions of loyalty
- Utilitarianism: issue of qualitatively greater pleasures or pains – and why
- Kantian Deontology: what counts as treating people as ends or means

# Questions