

Prisoners. . .

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Garnett Larson has definite ideas of her own about the purpose of education, particularly for inmates. She said classes keep their intelligence alive, open them to new ideas and make them use their minds and give them other viewpoints.

"If you starve their intelligence, you deprive them of their personhood long before you deprive them of their bodies," she said, referring to some of the death row inmates she teaches.

Larson has a master's degree in social work and doctorate degrees in English and philosophy. She retired from teaching graduate courses in social work at UNL and has taught inmates at the penitentiary for more than four years.

Although she was never afraid to teach inmates, Larson said, in the beginning she did have mixed feelings about teaching on death row because she opposes the death penalty.

"I really didn't know what the impact would be on me if one of my students were to be executed, but I finally decided that is my problem and not theirs," she said.

Larson said Rice and other students at the penitentiary are among the most promising she has ever had.

"I appeal to a different side of them, I don't see the criminal side," she said.

Having a different background than most of her students has proved to be quite useful, Larson said.

"There is a great culture difference between us," she said. "We have enough variety and common experiences between us that we hold an interest for each other."

Classes she teaches are "intellectual and personal exchanges," she said. Both student and teacher develop understanding and tolerance.

"I do not like 'parroting' ideas and they don't either," she said. "They are willing to question and consider ideas, not simply agree with them."

"It seems to me that even people who cannot live on the outside should be provided with the most positive life possible — wherever they are. Just because they are alive and they are people," she said.

Larson said she doesn't draw morals or teach lessons from the literature she uses for class. However, she said, when reading students' work, she certainly learns a lot.

Grading papers, isn't something she enjoys now any more than when she worked for Louise Pound as a "reader" during her college days, Larson said. She doesn't mind doing it, however, if the paper contains some real ideas. Her students never disappoint her, she said.

A way to escape. . .

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The first courses Paul Thompson took through the education program came 30 years after the last formal classes he had attended. Now he has 59 credit hours toward an associate's degree in business and would like to complete a bachelor's in business administration.

"I don't care how long it takes, even if I'm 65, I'm going to finish," he said.

The education program has come a long way, from using a cardboard model of a computer in math class five years ago to teaching with an Apple II terminal today.

Dave Fowler, general studies chairman of the correctional division of Southeast College, attributes the success of the program to its excellent teachers from UNL and the corrections staff. Funds supplied by the penitentiary add to the quality of the program as well, he said.

The same rules, like academic probation, apply to inmates as they do to students outside. If a student repeatedly fails courses, Fowler said, he is out of the program.

What people may not realize is that participating in the education program is much like attending night classes at any college, he said. Inmates are given the opportunity to take classes after a day's work and must pay for their tuition with Pell grant funds, just as many other students do.

Society will benefit more

"I think there is a need for prisons and I have no doubts about this place as a place of punishment — certainly that occurs here," Fowler said. "The difference is that society will benefit more from an educated person coming out."

It is difficult, he said, to tell from statistics what effect education has on recidivism, the act of returning to prison repeatedly.

The only fact generally agreed upon is that men are less likely to return to prison as they grow older, he said. Younger men are most likely to return to prison, but also are more likely to have academic deficiencies and will enroll in classes more frequently.

Because inmates have different problems in adjusting to society, a combination of programs along with the education program helps their chances for successful living, Fowler said.

The experiences of repeat offenders seem to bear truth to that idea. Gary Bohl, who is serving a three-year sentence for check fraud, said he had been in prison three times. He said ideas from several programs have helped him to realize he will not be coming back.

Bohl has completed his general studies degree through the education program. He said he could not get a good job without more education.

When he is released in August, Bohl said, he will begin classes at UNL. He hopes to finish his bachelor of science degree in geology.

"I think that people will look at my education and accept it without saying, 'Well, you're an ex-con and we are not going to give you a chance,'" he said.

Other inmates sometimes react negatively to those who take classes, but Bohl said it doesn't bother him.

"Oh yeah, you get it (negative comments), but I just shrug my shoulders and halfway feel sorry for them

because maybe they are missing something they could use," he said.

Classes help remove him from the "dinginess" of prison life and make him draw on what he has learned to look at things from a different perspective, he said.

"You can go out into the yard here and listen to guys planning their next crime," Bohl said. "But in the education program, you can make a clean break with your past."

Another inmate, Chico Watkins, said the only way to rehabilitate a criminal is to do it mentally. Watkins has earned associate degrees in business and general studies through the program.

If inmates don't change the way they view things, they become repeat offenders and "make a future out of the past," he said.

Watkins, who was convicted of burglary, said he has been a repeat offender, but has learned, through various programs, to change his priorities. When released, he would like to go into counseling work, he said.

It is hard to keep contact with reality while serving a sentence, Watkins said.

"It's just like being dead in here. You can go out in the yard, look at the cars on 13th Street and watch them go by, while you are in here, standing still."

More honest than television

Education is the best contact with reality that inmates can have, he said. It provides a more honest picture than the television or newspaper does and better prepares them to join the world outside.

"Since I've been in school, I can see something. Before, when I was just out in the yard, I was not benefiting," Watkins said. "In school, I benefit."

As one walks into the educational building at the penitentiary, one sees a poster that says "the road to anywhere starts from where you are." The students seem to agree.

Many students begin their class work with a sociology course taught by Mike Shaughnesy. In his class, a day's discussion might range from Japanese technology to work ethics and materialism in the United States.

Shaughnesy, a teaching assistant in educational psychology at UNL, has taught in the prison education program for three years. He said he has found that many of his students at the penitentiary are more highly motivated than their UNL counterparts. If inmates can achieve good grades through hard work and study, he said, they realize they have potential.

The classes he teaches use a format based on reality, Shaughnesy said. He said he tries to show inmates how theories work and how they fit together.

"I often feel at the end of a night teaching that I have learned more from them than they have from me," he said.

Dave Joy, a graduate student at UNL, has taught accounting and related courses at the penitentiary for three years.

The most fun, he said, is to see two of his former students, now out of prison, who have come to the university to finish their degrees.

"I found in teaching there (at the prison) that a lot of intelligent people are there who are just looking for motivation and a way to change," he said.

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