

Captive Audience: Exploring Identities of Privilege and Marginality through a Service-Learning Partnership between College Students and Inmates at a Regional Jail

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In the spring of 2005, a group of young men at the 230 year old, all-male, liberal arts Hampden-Sydney College – with its impressive Federalist buildings, gently rolling hills, and row upon row of expensive SUVs – embarked on a weekly foray through the razor-wire fence, metal detectors, and thick steel doors of the southside Virginia Piedmont Regional Jail.¹ These students were engaged in a creative service-learning project designed to challenge them intellectually and personally as they ventured into unfamiliar territory. Service-learning, a form of experiential learning that gives equal weight to *both* words on either side of the hyphen, allows teachers and students to connect the principles and theories of the liberal arts classroom with civic engagement in the larger classroom of the community.

Students who participated in our year-long interdisciplinary course, *Social Documentary: Image, Text, and Context*, developed and implemented a group documentary project with inmates at the local jail. During the first semester students remained on the college campus, studying the power of documentary to examine social issues, to construct realities, to change perceptions, and to challenge assumptions of what it means to be human. Our examination brought to the fore the works of documentarians such as James Agee and Walker Evans, men whose narrative descriptions and photographs, respectively, of the United States Depression era in the South

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awakened citizens to rampant poverty and widespread inequity. Their documentary, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941), also brought to light the dignity, courage, and ingenuity of the families who suffered, challenging middle class citizens' views of poor people. Through careful examination of this and other works, our students discovered that documentary, although never an 'objective' reality as it is always collared by the perspective of the documentarian, is a mode of inquiry that seeks to privilege 'truth' over fiction. Difficult truths, like the ones Agee and Evans portrayed, are hard to ignore.

In the second semester students crossed the county line – and, in most cases, race and class lines – to become teachers and documentarians themselves, thus melding the classroom with the community outside the college gates. Over a period of three months, our students taught their inmate partners basic photography techniques and engaged in writing activities and discussion to explore issues of identity. Central to the project were questions about privilege and marginality, leading inevitably to questions about power and control. Who has a voice? Who is silenced? How can people in marginalized groups use images and text to give voice to the convictions by which they live their lives? *Living with Conviction* (2005), an exhibition of photographic images and text, was the tangible result of our collaboration, although, as we'll demonstrate, there were profound intangible rewards as well. Students recorded in journals and group discussion that they experienced personal growth, the dispelling of stereotypes about incarcerated people, and new regard for the importance of civic engagement. In addition, community members at both the College and the jail found, to their delight, that people in the larger community were not only interested in the work of the partnership but also very supportive of the joint venture. In short, we examine how we used documentary work as the catalyst for our service-learning project – melding the classroom with the community – and, in so doing, we examine how documentary work allowed

our students to explore identity, specifically, identities of privilege and marginality.

In the first section of our article, we define service-learning and discuss its efficacy in effecting social change. In part two, we outline the classroom portion of our course by reviewing course goals, examining students' preconceptions about incarcerated people, and summarizing Howard Zehr's groundbreaking work in restorative justice and transformative research, noting particularly its relevance for lessening social distance between people. In the third section, we discuss our use of photographic image-making as a tool for empowerment and a springboard for discussion. In part four, we share excerpts from students' writings as testimony of their newly acquired insights into identity, empowerment, and civic responsibility. Lastly, we conclude with a brief reflection of the 'documentary impulse' and its potential for transforming others and oneself.

Learning to Serve, Serving to Learn

One of the more frequently cited definitions of service-learning first appeared in a 1996 article by Robert Bringle and Julie Hatcher:

We view service learning as a credit-bearing educational experience in which students participate in an organized service activity that meets identified community needs and reflect on the service activity in such a way as to gain further understanding of the course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility. (1996, p.222)

Service-learning benefits both students and community partners. First, it allows students to link academic learning with experiences in the larger community. Second, it provides students with a model for lifelong civic engagement. Third, it fulfils a demonstrated need in the community. And, finally, in partnerships such as ours it provides college students, often members of privileged groups, the opportunity to dispel stereotypes they

may hold about members of marginalized groups. Bharat Mehra (2004) asserts that the requisite collaboration among service-learning participants both empowers people in marginalized groups and fosters acceptance of difference by those in privileged groups. He argues that

empowerment will emerge from an acknowledgment (self and social) of the worth and contribution of every individual participating in the collaboration; larger inequalities will get addressed by providing [community partners] with the resources to resist their marginalized status. (Mehra, 2004, p.9)

Indeed, our students of privilege discovered again and again the similarities between themselves and the inmates with whom they worked. The marginalized terms of ‘perpetrator’ and ‘inmate’ were replaced with the individual names of our partners; stereotypes faded as students interacted with their partners, learning about their interests, goals, and convictions. We suspect that because our students and the inmates were engaged in a common task, picture-making, and were reliant upon one another’s individual contributions for the success of the documentary venture, a sense of camaraderie quickly developed. Neither educational status, socio-economic status, incarceration nor race was important to the task at hand. Students themselves recognized the levelling effect, as the following young man noted in his journal:

Social distance did in fact lessen between the two groups – so much that at the end we considered ourselves one group, a group of citizens that came together to send a message to others. The inmates examined themselves, shared their thoughts, and exhibited their feelings. It is the attitudes exhibited in the text and the emotion on the faces in the pictures accompanying this text that portray [their] messages of hope, of pride, and of joy – [images] that defy the environment that they are kept in.

Jill Dolan (2001) provided an important theoretical underpinning for our work, particularly in regard to the aesthetic component of our project and the potential for the arts to explore identity and promote social change. Situated throughout her academic career at the centre of three fields – theatre and performance studies, lesbian/gay/queer (LGQ) studies, and women’s studies and in several roles including university administrator, faculty member, scholar, activist, and director – Dolan (2001) provides a unique perspective on the intersections of theory, practice, activism, and the arts. While Dolan’s (2001) art form is performance-oriented, her vision for social change easily encompasses the visual arts as well, a vision we shared in our work. We wanted our students to realize that documentary photography can be used as an activist tool.

Dolan (2001) advocates that we situate the struggle for social change in the academy, thereby allowing scholars and practitioners to become participants in public life, thus providing a place where ‘key political and social issues are worked out’ (2001, p.55). In support of her position Dolan cites Gregory Jay and Gerald Graff, members of the progressive advocacy group, Teachers for a Democratic Culture, who suggest that faculty teaching at such universities

would look to turn the campus into . . . a community where empowered citizens argue together about the future of their society, and in so doing help students become active participants in that argument rather than passive spectators. (Dolan, 2001, p.56)

It was our intent to provide a service-learning opportunity for our students that would enable them to actually become documentarians themselves, and, in so doing – as they learned more about the people with whom they worked – open themselves up to the possibilities of new ways of thinking about identity, difference, and social inequality.

Through the simple act of teaching photography – and using the images as a springboard for discussion – our students experienced firsthand the debunking of stereotypes about incarcerated people, the transformative power of art in giving voice to people in marginalized statuses, and the rewards that come from civic engagement when working with others in pursuit of a common task – in our case, creating an exhibition of images and text about the lives of incarcerated people.

Laying the Groundwork in the Classroom: Examining Documentary, Stereotypes, Restorative Justice, and Transformative Research

Our goal in the first semester of *Social Documentary: Image, Text, and Context* was three-fold: provide an historical overview of the efficacy of social documentary in giving voice to marginalized people and effecting social change, engage students in discussion about the moral and ethical obligations of the documentarian, and prepare students for their work at the jail. We began the semester with a historical overview of documentary photography and documentary theatre in the United States. We included in this study the works of documentary photographers such as Jacob Riss, Lewis Hine, James Agee and Walker Evans, Dorthea Lange, Paul S. Taylor, and Wendy Ewald – and documentary playwrights Eve Ensler, Anna Deavere Smith, Moisés Kaufman, Eric Bentley, Emily Mann, Studs Terkel, and writers from The Federal Theatre Project. The artists we chose all used their documentary projects to raise awareness of such social injustices and social issues as child labour, poverty, homelessness, mental illness, racial violence, hate crime, homophobia, the emotional toil of war, and workers' rights. As we examined the societal impact of these works, students began to realize that the role of the documentarian was much broader than they'd imagined. Their own work, they acknowledged, had the potential to effect community members in their own rural Virginia community by giving people a glimpse inside the cement walls of the jail.

Second, we sought to impress upon our students the immense responsibility and ethical obligation documentarians hold to the people with whom they work. Several guest documentarians – director and playwright Attilio Favorini, photographer Laura Chesson, and photographer and author Howard Zehr (1996, 2001, 2003) – talked with our students about their work. We travelled to the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University where we attended a lecture and discussion presented by Matt Herron, a photographer lauded for his images documenting the work of college students during the 1964 Freedom Summer as they registered southern Black citizens to vote.

We also read and discussed *Doing Documentary Work*, written by Robert Coles (1997), a founding member of the Center for Documentary Studies, as well as the writings of several documentarians whose photographs and playscripts we studied. In his text, Coles writes extensively and eloquently about the moral and psychological tensions experienced by the documentarian – the many ‘questions that confront us explicitly or by implication as we who take stock of others also try to live our own lives with some self-respect’ (1997, p.49). We anticipated that our men of privilege might experience, as James Agee experienced in the creation of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, a sense of being overwhelmed by what we find when we venture out from those places of privilege. Coles reminds us to be self-reflective, to consider carefully ‘our responsibilities to those with whom we come to spend our time, to whom we pose questions, or whom we ask to pose while we go click, click, click...’ (1997, p.74).

And, finally, our third goal, which grew directly from the second, was to provide our students with a framework for thinking about identity formation, particularly the social constructions of difference and the experiences of people in marginalized groups. Knowing that we’d chosen a population seemingly quite disparate from our own mostly upper-middle class, white, southern, seventeen and eighteen year olds, we realized we

would need to lay the groundwork carefully and thoughtfully. At first glance it seemed the only commonality was that all of the participants (excluding the two female teachers) were male.

We understood that our freshmen students' views of inmates were influenced by images of criminals presented in the media and popular culture. Katheryn Russell, in *The Color of Crime*, notes the widely held, but inaccurate view, that 'Blacks are responsible for the majority of crime in the United States' (1998, p.111). She attributes the public's skewed perspective – thus, our students' perspectives – in part, to the media. As examples Russell points to images of Black suspects in 'reality' police television programs cursing and harassing police officers, Black men in rap music videos engaging in activities associated with drug dealing, and Black men presented on the nightly television news as the perpetrators of violent street crime (1998, p.2). She points to rhetoric, too, as partly responsible for the misperceptions: the term 'Black on Black crime', for example, in a search of LEXIS/NEXIS articles yielded over one thousand articles, while a search with the terms 'White Crime' or 'White-on-White crime' yielded fewer than fifty (1998, p.115). Russell speculates that

[t]he skewed focus on Black crime by journalists and academics may simply reflect society's skewed concern with street crime. By this reasoning, because 'Blacks *are* [italics added] responsible for a disproportionate amount of street crime, they receive a disproportionate amount of attention by academics and the media. (1998, p.116)

While this rationale might explain the attention paid to crimes committed by Blacks, it does not explain why so little media attention is focused on crimes committed by Whites. In our class discussions, we examined the impact of white privilege (McIntosh, 1998) as one possible explanation, a concept that, admittedly, our white students had difficulty accepting at first. They realized that Blacks in the United States were often disadvantaged by the

colour of their skin, but found it difficult to acknowledge that their own 'whiteness' afforded them special advantages or privileges. Gradually students began to see that they enjoyed the privilege of not being assumed by others to be criminals (or potential criminals) or to live in poverty; the opposite was true, they realized, especially for black men. Our hope as instructors was that once our students met the inmates and began the documentary project, their misperceptions would abate.

The point is that prior to our work in the jail our students – each of whom was white, male, and upper middle class – viewed the incarcerated participants in our upcoming project, the majority of whom were black (socio-economic status unknown), in abstractions and stereotypes, in keeping with Russell's findings above. We suspected that our students, too, had begun to 'other' the inmates, first aggregating the inmates on the basis of their master classes or the classes they assumed the inmates would occupy (incarcerated, black, and poor) and then dichotomizing them into a group of people essentially different from themselves (Rosenblum and Travis, 2003).

In fact, when we asked our young men to reflect on their initial concerns about our work in the jail, their comments pointed to concerns about identity. One man wrote that he hoped he wouldn't 'look stuffy'; another wrote that he was

a little nervous about how they will see us knowing that we are students from Hampden-Sydney College. . . my biggest fear is that they will not care about what we are trying to teach them and that they won't make an effort to learn.

Another remarked that 'I'm a little worried that they won't understand our professional relationship, but I doubt that any of them will make me seriously uncomfortable'. A colleague expressed his concern about the inmates' ability to understand and comprehend the photographic concepts and skills taught in the course. This same man noted that he was

most eager to discover the similarities between myself and the inmates . . . [although] I'm a decent, law abiding citizen who would never be caught dead in a jail cell, whereas the inmates each committed a crime.

A couple of the students' remarks revealed their insecurities:

I am mostly nervous about the way I will be received by the inmates at the jail, and I am uncertain whether I will be able to maintain a confident appearance even though I may be a little uncomfortable on the inside.

His colleague wrote that

I am nervous in general about meeting the group of inmates and getting settled into the routine of visiting the jail. I am always nervous, however, when I am going to be introduced to a new group of people and/or a new setting.

Many of the young men also noted their excitement about the project and their eagerness to begin their work at the jail.

To address their concerns we invited a psychology professor who had completed several years of research in prisons, working closely with inmates, to talk with our students. She dispelled many of the stereotypes – and resultant fears – that the students held, insisting that the work our men were about to undertake was valuable, necessary, and welcomed by the inmates. At the end of the second semester we visited the jail and met with the superintendent, a teacher, and several officers, one of whom took us on a tour of the facility. Finally, we looked to Howard Zehr (1996, 2001, 2003), who had visited our class during the first semester, and his principles of restorative justice and transformative research as a model for our documentary work.

The writings of author, scholar, photographer, and social activist Howard Zehr served as the inspiration for our work at Piedmont Regional

Jail. Zehr is widely regarded as one of the founders and foremost proponents of the restorative justice movement. Unlike the traditional approach to justice in the United States – a view that sees criminal activity as a crime against the state more so than an injustice against a person or a community – restorative justice, as Zehr explains, ‘says that what really matters about crime is that harm has been done to people and their relationships’ (2001, p.194). Zehr, in an article based on an address he gave at the 1998 Summer Peacebuilding Institute at Eastern Mennonite University, writes that restorative justice answers the question, ‘What does justice require?’ in the following ways:

It says that what victims require must be the starting point of justice. It answers that offenders’ needs and offenders’ obligations are central to justice. It says that the community has a role in justice. (2003, p.7)

We sought to become a part of the justice community by interacting with the inmates, hearing their stories, and sharing our own.

Restorative justice, according to Daniel Van Ness and Karen Heetderks Strong (1997), authors of *Restoring Justice*, encourages offenders to take responsibility for the harm they have caused in an effort to reduce the likelihood of future harm. It recognizes that providing redress for victims is critical, as is promoting the means for the offender to offer reparation. Restorative justice does not leave the problem of crime to the courts alone, but ‘recognizes the role of community involvement and initiative in responding to and reducing crime’ (1997, p.41). Of course, we could not provide the means for the inmates to offer reparations to the victims of their crimes, nor did we wish to do so. What we could – and did – do, however, was to invite inmates to use the creative process of photography, self-portraiture and writing as a way to reflect upon their identities. This process became a catalyst for meaningful interactions between our students and their inmate partners.

Likewise, transformative research, according to Zehr, ‘aims at social action, building community, promoting dialogue, reducing social distance ... giving voice to marginalized people, promoting justice’ (2003, p.9). Zehr demonstrates this mode of research in his provocative book *Doing Life* (1996), a book of portraits and interviews about men and women serving life sentences in Pennsylvania. Zehr photographed the prisoners in their street clothes in front of a plain background and transcribed their interviews verbatim. His primary goal, he notes, was ‘to offer an opportunity to see offenders as individuals with their own fears and dreams, rather than as stereotypes’ (1996, p.5), a goal we embraced as well. For our project we imagined photographs where each inmate would choose both how he wanted to be represented and how others would see the images he created. Our aim was to lessen the marginality and stigma imposed by incarceration by offering each man the opportunity to present himself using his own voice, thereby challenging the stereotypes presented in the media.

Photography, Identity, and Empowerment

The collaborative relationship between subject and photographer is often examined, explored and exploited – and has been since the advent of the medium. Most documentary photographers strive to maintain a relationship of neutrality with their subjects, but it is almost impossible to remain detached. Our goal was to use the camera as a tool for self-empowerment, allowing inmates to explore how they wanted to present themselves to the world. While we chose to loosely define our work as documentary, our project is unusual in that the inmates created their own portraits. We looked to the work of photographer Wendy Ewald (2000) as a model for our approach. While teaching and photographing children in Appalachia, Ewald became frustrated with the barrier the camera created between her and the children. She broke with the traditional role of documentarian by giving the children cameras and sending them into their own communities to take

pictures. The children created compelling images from their communities and personal lives, realms in which Ewald had only limited access. Ultimately, Ewald asks the question, ‘Who or what is it . . . that really makes a photograph – the subject or the photographer?’ (2000, p.17).

Believing photography to be subject-centred, we designed our project so that the participants controlled the production of images. In our project, inmates both photographed themselves using pinhole cameras and directed their student partners to make pictures of them using traditional cameras. They also helped students to make their own portraits, so that all roles in the process were shared. We used writing prompts and discussions to generate the text that was either presented directly on the photographs or displayed as a wall plaque next to the image in the exhibition.

After the group had created several images, students led discussions about cropping, composition and camera angle. This led us to an exploration of content, photographic metaphor, and ultimately personal expression and intention. Through their images and their testimony, our inmate partners provided glimpses into the many facets of their lives – as inmates, yes, but also as fathers, brothers, workers, children, uncles, partners, and citizens. These conversations allowed both the inmates and the students to talk about how they wanted to be seen and how they see themselves. Group members worked together to select which images would ultimately be presented to the public. Sharing control of the photographic and editing processes offered inmates a rare opportunity for personal expression.

Reflections and Transformations

Living with Conviction (2005), an exhibition of photographic images and text, was one tangible result of our collaboration. Our inmate partners created compelling works that both expressed their experiences behind bars and the convictions with which they live their lives. Our college students, too, created something meaningful – a space for bridging differences and

fostering understanding. They were proud of their work as the facilitators of the project, aware that what they had done mattered. When the exhibition opened at the college, students greeted visitors with enthusiasm and eagerly shared their experiences.

Students' weekly reflective and analytical journal writings attest to the significance of their experiences as well. Reflection, an essential component of the service-learning experience, connects the service activity with academic goals and objectives. As Richard Conville and Sara Weintraub [n.d.], editors of the National Communication Association's service-learning website explain, reflection encourages critical thinking as students consider their role in the project, the situation(s) leading to the community need they are addressing, their relationships with their community partners, and their own role in effecting social change. Each week following their work at the jail students completed a journal entry about their experiences, following a format suggested by Ed Zlotkowski (2000) in *Assessing Service-Learning*. Each entry consisted of a description of the session, a personal response to the experience, and an analysis linking the service-learning experience to the course curriculum. Below, we share excerpts from their writings, used with the permission of the authors. One young man noted a change in his perception:

I will really miss working, hanging out, talking, and getting [to] know all the men. It has been a lot of fun and a great learning experience. Before we started visiting the jail and working with the men I used to think that all the people who were in jail were bad people, when really they are not all bad. The men we have been working with opened my eyes to this and helped me to really see that we are a lot alike except for the fact that they got caught when they made a mistake.

After our last day at the jail, another student wrote:

When I arrived at the jail . . . I was surprised to realize that I was sad . . . I think that in the end . . . we had somewhat overcome the process of othering the inmates. I feel like that is a main objective of a documentarian, and we pulled it off.

Some of the most compelling insights emerged in the students' summative papers, insights that give most credence to the efficacy of service-learning in liberating students to think about the world and the people in it with empathy and understanding. As one student explains:

I quickly realized through this project that it is foolish to judge someone on the basis of his or her misfortune. It is far better to examine the attitude one possesses about it, and the changes they make within to overcome their plight.

Another student discovered a sense of empowerment and civic responsibility:

Through our project at the jail I have seen the impact which can be made by doing what we did and getting involved. The comments that people made when they saw the exhibition and the work that we and the men did really showed how doing what we did can change people's views of certain aspects of society.

The students, of course, were not the only people who benefited from the project. Our inmate partners were moved to find that people in the community were interested in their work and eager to learn about their experiences. At our final visit to the jail we presented each inmate with a portfolio including reproductions of his work, news articles about the project, promotional materials, and an exhibition catalogue. When each man received his portfolio, he pored over the contents with a sense of what can only be described as unabashed pride. The officers at the jail told us that

once the inmates returned to their housing units they shared the materials with others in their pod.

After an exhibition of the work at the college, we transported it to the jail for a second opening. We held a private artists' viewing for the inmates and students before visitors arrived. The pride the inmates felt was palpable. Here was their work, on exhibition, for a community to see.

Community ties were also strengthened as a result of our collaboration. Local and regional papers carried stories about the partnership between the college and the jail. Hampden-Sydney College, whose mission is to 'form good men and good citizens in an atmosphere of sound learning', recognized an excellent example of the mission statement at work and promoted the project on its website and in its alumni magazine. The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, located in Richmond, is interested in exhibiting the show as part of its travelling education and outreach program. Additionally, we are scheduled to exhibit our project in a Richmond gallery that features contemporary art. We have invited our inmate partners, many of whom will be released by the time of this show, to attend the opening. We look forward to this event where guests, artists, and students can mingle and chat freely.

Conclusion

Robert Coles (1997), in *Doing Documentary Work*, observes that the yearning to explore, to understand, to show, to tell – what he identifies as 'the documentary impulse' – is universal, noting that natural curiosity is one impetus for exploration. Coles contends that others are compelled – convicted, if you will – by a call to service, to change the world for the better (1997, p.251). It has been our experience that the first impulse is what initially motivated our students to participate in the Social Documentary class; they were curious about what life behind bars was like. As the project evolved, however, their impetus for exploration evolved as well. Once they realized firsthand that documentary work could serve to

dismantle misguided assumptions about people in marginalized statuses, their work took on new meaning. They committed themselves to the task of representing their inmate partners with the dignity and respect often denied them, focusing on their humanity, not their crime.

Coles (1997) observes that those documentarians engaged in serving others soon recognize an emerging, coexistent need – the need for introspection:

the experience of service can soon enough prompt a need for reflection – and so it is that documentary work can itself become a kind of service: the narrative work done among those vulnerable ‘others’ can enable us to stop and reflect upon who ‘they’ are, and what ‘we’ are trying to accomplish. The call to documentary work is an aspect of the call of stories, of our wish to learn about one another through observation of one another; that way, we can consider how we are getting on with one another, serving each other, with documentary work as the reflective side of such service – those stories and pictures a chance for us to wonder how we are doing as we try to affirm ourselves by reaching toward others, helping to make a difference in a neighbourhood, a nation. (pp.251-252)

We hope that in sharing our experiences behind the bars of the Piedmont Regional Jail others will be inspired to implement similar projects. The rewards far surpassed our expectations. We discovered that it is indeed in the *doing* that students confront and rethink their stereotypes and misconceptions about those people different from themselves. Likewise, it is in the *doing* that our inmate partners found a way to express their own identities – to share their inner convictions about their lives, their goals, and their responsibilities to their communities as well.

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