

THE CONTINUING CHALLENGE OF PROGRESSIVE THOUGHT: LESSONS FROM A COLLEGE IN PRISON

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Today in the United States, more than two million people are in prison, with no less than twenty million carrying felony convictions that will most likely diminish their earning capacity, bar them from certain occupations, and, depending on the state in which they live, prevent them from voting. These stark statistics are not just numbers to me. For most of the last decade, I have been deeply involved in the Bard Prison Initiative—commonly known as BPI—which is a full liberal arts program, leading to Bard College degrees, that operates in six New York State prisons. Spending time in these prisons and some others, getting to know people who are being held there or who have been in custody, and learning about the massive buildup in rates of incarceration that have occurred in the US since the 1970s, has taught me a great deal—and in what follows, I will share some of what I have learned from this experience and then briefly discuss how that connects to what I would call the continuing challenge of progressive thought.

I will begin at the beginning. On a hot July day in 2008, I was escorted into a maximum security prison located in the Catskill region of New York State. I had never been inside a prison before. This particular facility, which looks like a huge sandstone fortress, holds about 1,000 men, most of them serving relatively long sentences for serious, often violent felonies. I was going to this prison to teach a seminar on the history of American education, using a syllabus I had last used with Harvard College undergraduates during the fall of 2006.

Although I tried to look nonchalant, I was somewhat scared by all the security—not only metal detectors like those at an airport, but also a series of locked doors and gates, and correctional officers posted at corners all along the corridors. As we walked through those long cinder-block corridors, men in green prison uniforms streamed past, some chatting, others shuffling along. All were going out to spend time in the yard, where there are cement benches and tables, basketball hoops, a running track, weight machines, and telephones to place collect calls home. I did not know whether to smile or look away as some of the men looked at me quizzically and others simply marched along, a few chatting with friends.

When we finally arrived at the wing of the prison known as “the school,” the Bard colleague who was escorting me took me to the door of my classroom and turned on his heels, saying: “Here we are. Enjoy.” I looked through the glass window of the door and saw sixteen men in green uniforms, sitting in a semicircle. I felt like running back through those gates, but before I had time to think, one of the students opened the door, and said: “You must be Professor Lagemann. We’ve been waiting for you.” I had no choice but to walk in, put my books down, and start teaching and, before the class ended two hours later, I had totally forgotten where I was. The students were bright, engaging, very good humored, and polite. Teaching that class had been great fun—and that has been the case with almost every class I have taught in prisons ever since.

My new students were a varied bunch. Some were extremely well-spoken and articulate, while others were shy and reticent. A few had taken a number of history classes previously, but most had never taken a college history course. Some wrote final papers that were strong substantively, well organized, and totally grammatical, while others handed in writing that was more superficial and difficult to follow. The best papers were on a par with some of the very good papers I had read at Harvard, and all were at least competent at what might be described as a college level.

The students I had in that seminar, and BPI students generally, are representative of the New York State prison population. They are disproportionately African American or Hispanic. Most are from New York City—indeed, from the city’s poorest, toughest neighborhoods—places such as Brownsville in Brooklyn or the South Bronx; and most dropped out of school before finishing high school. Even though most found school much less exciting and satisfying than life in the street, by the time they enroll in BPI, they are eager for more education. They know college may increase their chances of landing a good job when they go home—as almost all will do one day; but even more than that, they want the knowledge, understanding, cultural fluency, and skill that going to college can provide.

BPI is highly selective. It is perhaps harder to get into BPI than it is to get into Harvard. There are often ten applicants for every seat that is available. To win one of those scarce and much sought after seats, men and women must take an essay test and go through a personal interview. Prior academic achievement is not a criterion for selection. Very few applicants can write complete sentences, let alone demonstrate competence in college mathematics at the point of admission. Motivation and evidence of likely persistence, as judged by independent reading, repeated applications interspersed with finding a peer tutor, or compelling comments about what having more education might mean, are the qualities that will get one admitted. BPI is premised on the belief that almost all adults who want to learn can do so, if they are sufficiently eager and willing to work very hard and stay with difficult tasks, and if, in addition, they are offered good teaching along with whatever help and support they need. Admission criteria reflect the premium BPI puts on ambition and drive.

Beginning with few academic skills, but armed with lots of energy and determination, new students face a heavy course load made up of both required and elective classes. There is a year-long sequence of grammar and composition, in which the basics of college writing are taught through the analysis of different works of literature combined with constant essay writing—and even more constant rewriting. As there is on Bard’s home campus, there is a two-semester freshman seminar, which is, in essence, an introduction to “the great books,” beginning with the Bible and running up to such twentieth-century classics as Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* and James Baldwin’s *Notes of a Native Son*. In addition, there is a noncredit college algebra class for students who need such catch-up before beginning a calculus course. In addition to those courses, beginning students may choose classes in literature, foreign language, the social sciences (including history), science, or the arts through the many electives open to them. Elective classes enroll beginning students alongside more advanced ones.

The first year in BPI, we are told, is a trial by fire, necessitating total devotion, little sleep, and the capacity to cope with a roller coaster of emotions, ranging from the high exhilaration of getting an “A” on a test to the low and lost feeling of being asked to rewrite a paper for a third or even fourth time. I’ve heard that wives and mothers are sometimes told not to visit and that students give up the jobs that earn them pennies to spend on extra food in the prison’s commissary—in order to meet the high demands of acquiring the wherewithal to do college-level academic work.

The growth evident in students during that tough first year is dramatic—and it shows not only in grammatical writing and speaking, but also in reasoned argument, capacity to analyze dense texts and to decipher and follow complicated instructions, and confidence as a learner. Students come to know that answers must be justified with relevant rationales, that “truth” often depends on perspective, and that people of different cultural experience may see, hear, think, and act in very different, but equally legitimate ways. Most important perhaps, they recognize that they have mastered material they once found impossible and can now read, write, and speak in ways that mark them as “educated.” Mastery builds confidence and for almost all men and women in BPI, the first year is confidence building, which enhances subsequent performance in the college and, later, after release.

All this, started in a student’s first year and honed throughout the time students spend in the college, enables them to earn regular Bard degrees—initially associate’s degrees and then, for those who do well at the associate’s level, bachelor’s degrees. Even more important, it enables them to return home when their sentences are complete, or when they have been paroled, prepared to meet the considerable challenges they will face finding housing, reuniting with families, securing jobs, and, for some, returning to school. The rate of return to prison nationwide runs well over 50%, while the return rate for Bard graduates is 2%. The vast majority of Bard alums returning home are employed within a month, many in good, family wage jobs in health or social service agencies, with others in publishing, real estate, or environmental

work. Quite a few are also in graduate school at NYU or Columbia; one is studying divinity at Yale; and many of those who did not complete a BA while in prison are now finishing undergraduate degrees at the City University of New York.

With that as background, I would like to turn to what I have learned over nearly a decade of teaching, advising, working with alumni, and helping to raise the funds needed to keep this college in prison open and running. First, I will describe what I have learned about what is involved in providing a powerful educational experience to people who have not previously been well-served by our public schools; and then, I will turn to what I have also learned about progressivism in education.

BPI is a remarkable college. I don't mean that in an arrogant ways, but BPI is remarkable because it "works"—as I have indicated, it increases academic competence, it enhances post-program outcomes such as avoiding being returned to prison and finding and holding good jobs, and, for many, it leads to further education. It's worth noting, too, that even as we maintain very high academic standards, almost everyone who is admitted to the college finishes his or her degree. Those BPI students who do not finish the program with a degree fail to complete because they have been released from prison or transferred by the prison authorities to a facility where Bard does not operate. BPI's essentially 100% completion rate is particularly noteworthy when compared to national rates of college completion, which run under 60% for full-time bachelor's degree candidates and under 40% for associate degree candidates

I think BPI has been able to move its students up to a college level of academic competence and then over all the hurdles presented by its full and rigorous liberal arts curriculum as a result of three aspects of its program. The first is the premium it puts on student aspiration. Ambition gets you into BPI and it helps sustain the drive required to make it through. Recall that admission essays and interviews focus on asking applicants why they want to go to college. We care deeply about what students say they, themselves, want to accomplish. Students in BPI are not mandated to go to college by prison authorities, as they are to enroll in some so-called correctional education programs run by the Department of Corrections. They are extremely eager to get into BPI and realize they have been given a rare privilege—securing a college education and degree with all expenses paid. The fact that prison authorities do not control who is admitted to BPI is critical. Within an institution where one is not free, participating in a program that is not sponsored or defined by the people who supervise your life enables students, at least for short periods of time, to step out of their status as "prisoners" and to re-experience what it is like to be free men and women. BPI faculty and staff never ask students about their crimes—though students may choose to tell us. To us, students are students and not prisoners. This strengthens student motivation to succeed and adds to what can be accomplished.

The second ingredient critical to success has to do with having developed what I call a pedagogy of engagement. All classes are small, typically around twelve or fifteen students, and all feature discussion, with little or no lecturing. All faculty members

are drawn from Bard or such neighboring colleges as Vassar, Williams, and Dutchess Community College, and all are experienced discussion leaders. Students know that “participation counts”—not the volume of comments they offer, but their relevance and thoughtfulness, as well as the evidence they provide that they have listened intently to what others have to say. Syllabi for classes usually include both short-term weekly assignments and at least one longer term paper or project. Although faculty who are teaching in a prison are not allowed to linger after class, most arrange to come into the prison for an extra “mod”—a class period in prison speak—in order to work individually with students who have questions or special interests or who are struggling and need extra help. In these ways among others, classes are structured to promote high levels of individual involvement and to ensure that no one gets lost.

The third element of BPI’s operation that is vital to its success is the strong sense of community that exists among all who are involved in the college. There is an implicit contract made when new students are admitted: if you, the new student, do your part—completing all assignments on time and to the best of your ability, actively participating in every class, and, as necessary, foregoing other activities—we, the faculty, will do our part—working with you in class and out to ensure that you master all we are trying to teach. Right from the start, students are expected to help one another and are encouraged to do so. Peers enrolled in the same class are expected to discuss papers with one another and often they are asked to work in pairs or groups. More advanced students who have served as informal recruiters for new ones are often able to help them master the challenges of the first year, which they themselves have only just left behind. Comradeship that begins outside BPI, for example, in the prison yard where non-BPI people may be invited to join in a debate among BPI students about politics or some issue from class, tends to carry over to the classrooms and study rooms of the college; and it even continues outside the prison, when people are released, go home, and begin to look for jobs. It is not unusual for BPI alums to find employment through a referral made by a peer. Prisons are places where distrust is rampant and where the frequent abuse and violence necessitates that one always keep one’s guard up. Developing a circle of peers, who one can trust and respect, has a profound effect on the willingness of students to open themselves to asking questions, seeking help, and learning.

In combination, the three aspects of BPI that I have mentioned—an emphasis on student aspiration, a pedagogy of engagement, and a vibrant sense of community—have enabled the college to offer its students a powerfully transformative learning experience. In combination, they have created a level of intensity and a degree of purposefulness that may be necessary conditions for excellence in education. To steal the title of Richard Arum and Jospia Roksa’s two books about going to college, our students are not “adrift.” They are working very hard and actively learning, growing, and developing, and if the record of alums who have preceded them holds, they will make many positive contributions to their families and to society when they go home.

If BPI has taught me a good deal about the components of effective collegiate education, it has also offered me an opportunity to observe a demonstration proof of what can be achieved when progressive ideas are translated into practice. As may be clear already, BPI embodies principles that have long been favored by proponents of progressive education. It acknowledges student knowledge and interest in planning instruction; it ensures that educational experiences allow for active student involvement; and it places an emphasis on creating bonds of mutual respect in and through education. Sadly, in my view, most of the American public neither understands, nor favors, these principles and American education has not usually embodied them. Compulsion—notably in the form of compulsory education laws and all sorts of curricular requirements—have often been emphasized more than free will; direct instruction, in the form of drill and practice and teacher dominated discussions, has been practiced more often than student-guided inquiry; and top-down accountability, in the form of teacher testing and legislative discussions of mandating more teaching hours for professors, has been privileged over community.

Owing to an orientation that too often undermines student learning, American schools and colleges have not done as well as they might have done, either in educating all youngsters to their highest potential, or in readying them for high-skill employment and active, intelligent involvement in public affairs. To serve all students well and benefit society generally, I believe the fundamental orientation of American education must be shifted, not overnight, but slowly, steadily, and determinedly over time. Traditional educational methods must be replaced with ones that embody more progressive approaches and, for that to happen, progressive ideas and values must be better understood by more Americans and more fully accepted as guides to education policies and practices.

Consider a concrete, but hypothetical example of the changes that I hope a better understanding of progressivism might allow. Today, students are required to go to school in sequential, lockstep fashion, year after year, until typically they are sixteen years of age. Of course, far too many youngsters, especially in troubled urban schools with large minority populations, do not do this since they have unofficially dropped out, or, thanks to poor academic performance or zero-tolerance discipline policies, have been pushed. Only a minority of BPI students graduated from high school before being sent to prison. Most were eager to leave traditional classrooms for the thrill, excitement, comradeship, and potential profits they could find in the street, and their street activities got them into trouble. Many were arrested as teenagers or even younger and imprisoned by the age of 16; and many who were locked up at that age will spend the next 10, 15, or 17 years living behind bars.

If one were to take progressive beliefs about education seriously, including progressive belief in beginning where students are and with their interests, I think we would need to acknowledge the preferences of young people who do not want to be in school. We would need to create opportunities for those who want to leave school

to do so without giving up on or leaving education behind. To do that, we might redefine the job of truant officers, making the focus not the return of students to school, but rather working with them to find positive nonschool opportunities to try out and enhance their entrepreneurial and leadership skills, or to use their talents as artists and musicians, or to explore new activities such as urban farming or cooking.

This is not an impossible idea. It is a variant of the German apprenticeship model, which enables young people to work in paid jobs, learning a trade, while finishing high school. Ways could be found to supervise out-of-school students and mechanisms could even be developed to assess their learning. That might enable students to cycle in and out of different educational settings, leaving and then returning to traditional classrooms when that seemed best suited to their interests and needs. The challenge in actualizing an idea such as this—as far out as it may sound—does not reside in the mechanics, but in mobilizing public opinion. The challenge does not lie in figuring out how to identify, oversee, and assess out-of-school learning and link opportunities for such learning to all that goes on in traditional schools and colleges; it lies rather in selling people on the value of progressive principles in education.

Many clever people have tried to educate other people about the merits of progressivism in education without a great deal of success. John Dewey was, of course, a notable example. He wrote what became the essays in *School and Society* to help parents understand what the University of Chicago Laboratory School was trying to do. Despite that effort, the parents continued to complain. More recently, Theodore and NancySizer as well as Deborah Meier have written any number of books trying to explain the progressive beliefs that have informed their work in schools, including their reliance on portfolios rather than tests to assess student progress. Nevertheless, the testing juggernaut has continued on its seemingly unstoppable path. The examples are legion. To embrace progressivism in education requires a difficult leap of faith, faith that Johnnie will learn to read without drilling the alphabet into his head; let alone, following my hypothetical, that Sonia will want to go to college and will muster the will and intelligence to do so after a time out working as an intern in a jewelry shop. It is difficult for many people, perhaps especially deeply caring parents, to take such a large leap of faith.

Despite the troubling historical record of people who have tried to be public advocates for progressivism in education, it is crucial, I believe, to continue to talk about progressive ideas and to explain where, when, and why they can be effective. Unlike traditional plans for education, whether embodied in a curriculum, an organizational chart for a school, or even a district-wide plan for in- and out-of-school education, progressive practices cannot be replicated in a cookie cutter fashion. They require not only in their implementation, but also in their design, evaluation, and modification in light of experience, the full participation of all who are involved. In consequence, progressive practices differ from one site to another and change constantly. They are always experimental and always under development. There may

be principles that are constant across sites—as was the case, for example, with the principles followed by the schools joined together in Ted Sizer’s “Coalition of Essential Schools,” but the enactment of those principles will reflect what the participants bring to their work as well as the particularities of time and place. That makes progressive practices more difficult to spread than traditional practices. They must be grown and constantly reinvented and cannot simply be scaled.

In the end, then, the spread of progressivism in education will depend on ideas being planted through frequent and continuing writing and talking. It will depend on those of us who believe in progressivism identifying and explicating progressive ideas in the education programs we know well. It may well be the case that BPI is remarkable in the outcomes it can help its student achieve, but I think it’s most worth talking about as an illustration of progressive education at work.

I will conclude with a story from a BPI class I once taught that underscored for me the importance of searching for ways to educate the public about education, including about the special scope and power of progressive principles. The class was an American history class focused on John Dewey and his contemporaries, people such as Jane Addams and William James. At one point, I suggested rather off-handedly that Dewey was better at helping us see the flaws in our current social arrangements than at describing how to change them. One of the more advanced students in the class, who had read a lot of Dewey, started fidgeting in his chair and finally erupted, saying: “I would respectfully submit, Professor Lagemann, that you are all wrong. Dewey told us that education is the only way to bring about social change.” Of course, this student was right and his comment led to a very fruitful discussion of how one could advance “public education” in the broadest sense of the term.

Finding ways to do that, to educate the public about all that is involved in education, especially good education, is what I would call the challenge of progressive ideas. Progressives were united in their belief that education was essential in fostering the values, attitudes, and capacities needed to sustain a democratic way of life. They wanted powerful education for the young, as well as constant, continuing education for those of us who are no longer so young and no longer in school. They wanted constant, continuing discussion and debate to inform our thinking about all sorts of complicated issues. That’s why Jane Addams organized forums at Hull House to bring different groups together to talk about current events in Chicago or around the country. It’s why early in his career Walter Lippmann studied and wrote about the formation of public opinion. It is also why John Dewey wrote regularly for the *New Republic* as well as for the Teachers College journal called *The Social Frontier*. Individuals such as Addams, Lippmann, and Dewey recognized that their efforts were not nearly sufficient to mobilize movement toward the kind of open and equal society they wanted to bring into being. But even knowing that, they never gave up on the belief that democracy depends on education. They never wavered in their certainty that Dewey was right when he asserted in his *Pedagogic*

Creed that “education is the fundamental method of social progress and reform.” Sustaining and building on that belief and working to translate it into policy and practice is the challenge they left to all of us who find inspiration in their ideas.

BPI represents an effort to include in the population of college students men and women who have been excluded from higher education. This exclusion is not a result of the fact that so many did not graduate from high school. Almost all prisons offer opportunities to earn high school equivalency certificates. People in prison are excluded from higher education as a result of an amendment to the 1994 Crime Bill signed by Bill Clinton, which barred the incarcerated from eligibility for Pell grants. Owing to the end of financial aid, most college-in-prison programs closed their doors and today there are very few degree-granting colleges operating inside correctional facilities. The Obama administration initiated a pilot program that will provides Pell grants to some students and I hope that effort will succeed. If it does succeed, and more college programs open inside the nation’s 1,800 state and federal correctional facility, I hope they take a page from BPI’s playbook, not copying exactly what BPI does, but sharing its respect for student initiative, its insistence on active learning, and its emphasis on community. Those are the hallmarks of good education—of progressive education—and several hundred BPI alums are living proof that they can foster learning and growth. It is time to put them into practice more widely.

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