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Reading as Bearing Witness: Incorporating the Voices of Incarcerated Youth in Honors

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University of Montana and the Free Verse Writing Project

Abstract: Honors faculty often engage students in service-learning and community-engaged courses to help students learn curricular concepts, develop skills in responsible citizenship, and positively impact their community. Authors consider how the greatest impact honors students can have may sometimes be through bearing witness rather than through direct service or volunteering. This essay explores a case study involving a community partnership between an honors college and a local non-profit serving incarcerated youth, where the primary goal is to bring the writing and voices of young, incarcerated authors into the college classroom and give their stories a wider audience. Authors describe the iterative development of this ongoing partnership, exploring its impact on curriculum, students, and the community partner. Adding to existing scholarship on successful community-engagement partnerships, this essay proposes that integrating written work of incarcerated youth in the college classroom creates an opportunity for honors students to read as a form of bearing witness to the lives and struggles of marginalized voices. In addition to transforming student learning, this project enhances the community partner's work by honoring the experience and amplifying the voices of incarcerated youth.

Keywords: community engagement; prison arts programs; whole student pedagogy; University of Montana (MT)–Davidson Honors College; Free Verse Writing Project (Montana)

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INTRODUCTION

The murders in spring and summer 2020 of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd ignited a nation long overdue for renewed and ongoing racial reckoning (Burch, Cai, Gianordoli, McCarthy, & Patel, 2020). The brutal and highly public nature of these killings made it clear that responding to racial injustice with silence was not a neutral choice. In the small predominantly white community of Missoula, MT, located on historic territory of the Salish, Kootenai, and Kalispel people and home to the University of Montana, community members grappled alongside the rest of the nation with responding to oppression and white supremacy in ways that were actionable and not simply performative. These questions made their way into faculty meetings at the University of Montana's Davidson Honors College (DHC), shaping considerations of how to address head-on issues of race, power, and oppression in classes that previously did not explicitly touch on these issues.

Lauren Collins, a teaching fellow at the Davidson Honors College, and Erin Saldin, the lead faculty course coordinator for the core honors course *Ways of Knowing*, looked specifically at this course as a space to dig into these topics and engage students in co-creating solutions. Amelia Hawes and Jorgia Hawthorne are students in the Davidson Honors College who engaged in the initial inception of these ideas in honors courses and were critical actors in the consequent ongoing community partnership. Nicole Gomez is the executive director of the non-profit community partner, the Free Verse Writing Project, which teaches literature and creative writing in juvenile halls across Montana.

In research on experiential learning and high-impact practices, scholars continually advocate for the importance of learning experiences that happen beyond the walls of the classroom. Research shows that these experiences engage students in more meaningful learning and are a statistically significant factor in keeping them in college. AAC&U considers service learning and community-based learning to be a key high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008). In these kinds of learning designs, student engagement with a community partner is an instructional strategy that enables students to gain direct experience with issues they are studying by working to analyze and solve problems that exist within their community. In addition to the benefits to student learning, these programs help fulfill the mission of higher education as a public good (Longo & Gibson, 2011; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011). In ideal community-engaged learning programs, academic and civic purpose are deeply intertwined and collaborations are mutually beneficial.

The ultimate goal is that these learning opportunities will have a positive impact on communities beyond the university. The research on whether these types of learning experiences do impact community partners or move the needle on social issues depends in large part on centering the needs of the organization rather than the needs of a class. Tracing the development of a community-engaged partnership can help show fellow honors educators the importance of 1) understanding the kinds of projects that will have the greatest impact on community partners; 2) using reading as a form of service learning by bearing witness; and 3) creating sustained impact for both colleges and community partners through long-term iterative relationships.

EXPLORATION OF IDEAS COURSES IN HONORS

The Davidson Honors College, like many honors colleges around the country, requires all students to participate in a common course: DHC's Ways of Knowing is anchored in texts exploring the human experience from ancient times to the present. Such courses generally have the goal of exposing students to a wide range of ideas, questions, and intellectual traditions that support their development as positive stewards of place and community. These courses also work to build community among students, allowing for a common experience and set of ideas that can anchor student identity and relationships in the honors college across their four years.

Honors courses should be designed to be broader, deeper, and more complex than other courses on campus (National Collegiate Honors Council Board of Directors, 2013). Classes like Ways of Knowing exemplify the academic rigor, critical inquiry, and deep discussion that characterizes honors education. In a 2014 article by deLusé in *Honors in Practice*, she describes the development by Arizona State University's Barrett Honors College of the course The Human Event, which is similar to Ways of Knowing. As deLusé lays out, in the 1970s honors courses on ideas like these often followed either a "Chicago model" or a "Columbia model" with the curriculum focused on classical Western intellectual tradition starting with ancient European philosophy. According to deLusé the Columbia model did include "contextual influences and currents of thought at a given time," "progress in the historical development of ideas," and material conditions at the time the works were produced, but the focus was primarily Western classical literature and thought (p. 85).

As common intellectual experiences for honors students, courses like Ways of Knowing wield great power over what ideas and writers are privileged and what names and works students are exposed to through their inclusion

in courses. The classroom as knowledge-producer fosters a learning ecosystem that moves in many directions: between the instructor and the students; between class content and the learning community; between students and their wider networks; between organizations and new ideas; and between students and the future advocacy in which they might participate. Debates about diversifying this type of course are common in honors colleges and often focus on the important goal of widening the scope of ideas to include non-Western voices and diversity in the areas of race, gender, intellectual traditions, and perspectives. Even so, the texts are usually part of the canon and are available in any library or large bookstore. Generally, courses on ideas rely heavily on texts written by acknowledged experts. Rarely does course content contain writing and reflections of incarcerated people, especially teenagers convicted of criminal offenses. Since incarcerated youth are generally not published authors, their writing would not be likely to appear in an honors classroom. This absence is one example of the many voices that are never represented in academia, much less an honors college.

ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT

In the summer of 2020, Ways of Knowing honors faculty determined that they needed to change the focus of the course to include conversations about race, oppression, and action. The theme that emerged for the course was justice. Having taught both service-learning and community-engaged courses previously, Lauren Collins began researching organizations locally in Montana that worked on racial justice and criminal justice reform. As Michelle Alexander writes in *The New Jim Crow*, “mass incarceration operates as a tightly networked system of laws, policies, customs, and institutions that operate collectively to ensure the subordinate status of a group defined largely by race” (2010, p. 13). Alexander argues that part of the solution to racial injustice is a human rights movement rooted in recognition of the basic dignity and humanity of all of us—including those caught up in the criminal justice system. Following the lead of Alexander, Collins reached out to the Free Verse Writing Project (hereafter referred to as Free Verse) to see if they would be interested in having students work on a project as part of the Davidson Honors College Ways of Knowing class. The idea was that if students could work on an applied project, they wouldn’t just talk about these ideas in class and consider ideas of justice contained in classic texts; instead, they would engage in real time with an organization actively working to make change.

When the initial meeting was held, Collins came to the table with the idea that since the class was about literature and ideas and since the community organization worked on teaching creative writing and poetry, perhaps the students could help develop a curriculum for Free Verse Project classes based on what they were reading in *Ways of Knowing* and provide additional lesson ideas that teachers might draw from. The director of the Free Verse, Nicole Gomez, quickly disabused her of this idea. Instead, what she said would really make a difference was if the class could help “pass the mic” and amplify voices and perspectives of the youth that Free Verse worked with.

Founded in 2014, Free Verse teaches literature and creative writing in juvenile detention centers across Montana, including at the Missoula Juvenile Detention Center, the Billings Juvenile Detention Center, the Ted Lechner Youth Services Center in Billings, and the Pine Hills Youth Correctional Facility, the long-term center for boys in Montana. The mission of the organization is to empower incarcerated youth across the state to gain agency over their own narratives by giving them the tools to tell their stories and then to amplify their voices through publication and circulation of their writing and artwork to as wide an audience as possible. Free Verse recognizes that 1) the voices of people who are incarcerated are often overlooked or discounted, and young people in the juvenile justice system are even more thoroughly silenced because their identities are protected due to their status as minors; 2) this neglect leads to a metaphoric invisibility in addition to their literal invisibility while hidden behind jail and prison walls; and 3) conversations about the justice system are necessarily incomplete without the addition and inclusion of these voices.

In addition, Free Verse acknowledges that 1) much of Montana art and literature succumbs to familiar tropes of the rural West that speak to a story of settler-colonialism written by those already empowered to speak; 2) as with the rest of the country, people of color are disproportionately represented in the Montana justice system; and 3) publication of the voices of incarcerated youth can bring these less-heard and historically marginalized voices into the Montana narrative, empowering them, amplifying their messages, and helping us to go beyond common tropes to uncover the complexity and nuance of life in this state. Finally, Free Verse recognizes that incarcerated youth are more likely to have experienced trauma, that incarceration is a traumatic experience itself, and that the healing power of art can lead to a reduction in recidivism.

TEACHING PUBLICATIONS OF INCARCERATED YOUTH, 2020–2021

As part of the response to reassessing the structure and flow of Ways of Knowing, Lauren Collins began including Free Verse Writing Project publications into the fall 2020 and spring 2021 course as the final set of readings that students engaged with. The publications included the first volume of the *I Am Montana* anthology series, the first issue of the three-part *QuaranZine* series, and the self-contained publication *Commissary Notes* (2019). The anthology *I Am Montana: Vol 1*, published in 2018, is a compilation of student writing exploring questions of place, identity, and experience by youth incarcerated at four different detention facilities across the state as well as by public high school students at the Billings Career Center. *QuaranZine* is a three-part zine series, published between June 2020 and August 2021, that features student writing from the same four detention facilities reflecting on the themes of isolation, anxiety, fear, family, home, exploration, whimsy, and discovery contemplated while experiencing incarceration during a pandemic. *Commissary Notes* is a 2019 publication compiled in collaboration with a University of Montana course called “States of Incarceration” that features student writing from the four detention facilities mapped onto the history of colonization and boarding schools in Montana.

A young writer in *Commissary Notes* reflects that “it hurts when you walk into a room / and everybody stares at you and hates you for who you are / and what skin color you are / because I want to walk into a room / where everybody you know doesn’t hate you / or look at you like you’re a different person . . .” (2019, p. 8). According to the 2020 Montana Youth Court Services Division’s annual report, Native American and Black youth make up 14% and 4% of referrals despite representing around 6% and 0.5% of the state population (Montana Supreme Court, 2020; U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In addition, almost one third of Montana’s justice-involved youth have a household income below \$20,000 (Montana Supreme Court, 2020). The disproportionate representation of youth of color and low-income youth in Montana’s juvenile justice system is a stark example of how systemic inequality shapes the lives of young people and how factors such as skin color or class background cause people to make assumptions about them before they get the chance to speak for themselves.

Amelia Hawes, an honors student enrolled in the Ways of Knowing section in fall 2020, was a student in the first class to read young, incarcerated

authors and to see into their lives and hear their stories in their own words. Free Verse provides youth a platform where they can express themselves freely without being limited by the criminal label that has come to define them in the public eye. The Free Verse publications were anonymous, and in the absence of specific information about the criminal records or past experiences of these youth, Amelia Hawes and her classmates in *Ways of Knowing* were able to see past the stereotypes that usually distort perceptions of incarcerated people and appreciate their work on a much more personal level.

For students unfamiliar with the lived experience of incarceration, reading personal stories from incarcerated youth put into perspective what a difficult and isolating experience detention can be, and it emphasized how truly burdensome it is to be seen as a criminal before being seen as a person. This new sense of understanding for their incarcerated peers challenged Amelia Hawes and her classmates to consider the roles they played in systems of oppression, and to realize that by subscribing to negative stereotypes, they were enforcing the inequality that allowed them to sit in a college classroom while confining the authors they read to a detention center. By reading Free Verse publications, Amelia Hawes and her classmates did not just challenge these ideas in theory but also applied them practically by the act of putting marginalized voices at the center of their studies. These new understandings moved many students, including Amelia Hawes and Jorgia Hawthorne, to move the work forward and continue finding ways to “pass the mic” to marginalized voices both inside and outside the classroom.

Jorgia Hawthorne, who took an honors course on the School to Prison pipeline in spring 2021, was forced to deal with her own implicit biases about incarcerated populations and the justice system itself. Society is conditioned to immediately think that criminals are people who have given up their humanity the moment they broke the law, eliciting comments like “They’re just a bad apple” or “They went down the wrong path,” implying that someone under the age of eighteen is past saving. It is easy to forget that incarcerated people are people first when societal norms demonize them, especially when those who are black, indigenous, and people of color are disproportionately affected. Having grown up in northcentral Montana in a town with a sizeable Native American population, a population that experiences incarceration at a higher rate than any other population, Jorgia Hawthorne realized when reading *Commissary Notes* (2019) that the words of the authors could very well be spoken by someone raised in her own community. This realization left her frustrated and angry, especially because youth incarceration is rarely a popular

topic of discussion, but it reflects so much of the social inequity and racial and economic marginalization that this nation continues to grapple with. Publications like *Commissary Notes* (2019) provided a window into what it is like to be a child dealing with discrimination, police brutality, substance abuse, the loss of a parent, and incarceration, thus marginalized and rendered voiceless by taking on the identity of a criminal.

The fact that Free Verse publications came directly from youth in the state of Montana made the connections even more meaningful. This local connection inspired Jorgia Hawthorne because she could see the potential for change that she was making right in her own community through raising awareness of the experiences of these youth. Social justice concerns too often focus on the trendy issue of the week, an issue that is usually national or global and to which one member of the public can almost never make a lasting change. The prison system is that kind of national problem, but Free Verse's mission to serve incarcerated youth locally in Montana highlighted that the issue is right in front of all of us and we might be able to make a difference.

Having taken Ways of Knowing within the Davidson Honors College previously, Jorgia Hawthorne connected deeply with the value of including voices of incarcerated youth in a course that provided a myriad of ideals and thoughts but that sometimes felt heavily academic and disconnected from contemporary social issues. In the everchanging, chaotic arena of social justice, people tend to fight the hardest for causes that affect them personally or occur directly in their community. As a result of this inspiration, in collaboration with Erin Saldin, Jorgia Hawthorne agreed to act in her second year as a Learning Assistant for Ways of Knowing, with the goal of bringing Free Verse publications into the course curriculum. The publication will be taught to new students at the Davidson Honors College in the fall of 2021. Her goal is that future Ways of Knowing students exploring big ideas and classical questions can be shown that national issues start from the local level and that there are opportunities to make changes on big national and global issues by listening to the stories and experiences of marginalized youth in their own community.

READING AS SERVICE AND BEARING WITNESS (IMPACTS ON THE COMMUNITY PARTNER AND INCARCERATED YOUTH)

The impact on the incarcerated young authors of having their words and work reach a wider audience and, specifically in this instance, read by Davidson Honors College students is difficult to measure and testimonial in nature

as of yet. When the students learn that their work will be published and made available in bookstores and libraries as well as studied on campus, they are often proud and excited, but given the transitory nature of the temporary detention system and the privacy protection policies, Free Verse often loses touch with the incarcerated youth before any long-term positive effects can be seen or measured. Communicating to them that their work is being read by college students has a positive impact as many of these young people have struggled to achieve traditional academic success or to imagine themselves at institutions of higher learning. They have shown pride in their work and themselves on hearing that their work is being circulated and read by college students for its merit as these are young people who often haven't received much encouragement or praise. When they realize that they have the ability to affect people with their writing and that they have talent to offer the world, they light up. As one Free Verse student said, "I've learned that I'm not just a bad kid, that I have a story to tell, and that my words are powerful."

The long-term impact of circulating the work of incarcerated youth won't be seen until conversations and policy decisions regarding justice reform reflect the fact that enough people have read their work to advocate for change, but testimony from students in the DHC classes suggests that such publications are effective at conveying the humanity of the incarcerated authors in ways that hold promise for the future. One student reported: "My biggest takeaway, after reading *Commissary Notes* and hearing our various speakers, is that these kids aren't just numbers we're collecting. They're people very near our age, people we could know, or could be, had we been on different paths." Another student reported: "I think the biggest connection to the class I made involves the Free Verse Writing Project and their book we just discussed, *Commissary Notes*. As I mentioned in class, it is one thing to hear about these youth that are incarcerated and seeing the numbers, and it is another thing to see what they are feeling and to some extent, feel that for yourself." This testimony suggests that the texts are effective at combatting the dehumanizing and silencing effects of incarceration and confirms to Free Verse that its mission is effective and that it needs to continue to elevate student voices into wider circulation.

Finally, Free Verse receives tangible benefits from bringing their publications into honors college classrooms: it supports the organization's sustainability; it demonstrates that they are fulfilling their mission of providing young voices with a widening platform; it acknowledges the literary merit of the work their students produce; and it thus helps them report to funders on the success of projects that grant money has supported. These benefits are

critical in the long term because they enable the organization to secure future funding for the classes and publications of its incarcerated students.

CONTINUING THE WORK

Moving forward, Jorgia Hawthorne and Erin Saldin will be incorporating the Free Verse publications into Ways of Meaning in a couple of unique ways.

First, the students in the class will be grappling with poems in the text *Living Nations, Living Words*, an anthology of contemporary Native American poetry compiled by the Poet Laureate of the United States, Joy Harjo. The class will already be ensconced in discussions about power, agency, voicelessness, and reclamation, and it will be using the interactive map that accompanies that text. The students will engage with the Free Verse texts soon after, deepening their reflection on issues of Native disenfranchisement and of voices/stories that we are and are not hearing, opening the possibility for creation of a Free Verse interactive map or other creative approach to making the invisible visible to a larger audience.

In addition, the Free Verse publications will be woven into a larger assignment for all students. For the past two years, Ways of Knowing students in Erin Saldin's class have used Ross Gay's compilation of "essayettes," *Book of Delights*, for a semester-long project on reflection, awareness, and justice. One element of this project asks students to compile their own Collections of Delights and to note, using whatever medium they choose, those moments in the semester that bring them delight. When students reflect on wonder and joy, they concurrently reflect on suffering and despair, so this project allows students room to wander through their academic experiences with eyes wide open to the beauty and the grief that they witness. They are asked to respond, in mini-assignments, to various readings that they encounter over the semester, and they will be engaging with the Free Verse publications at that time, responding to the question "How does this text/do these texts shift the way you think about your own place in this space?" This informal exercise offers students a chance to think creatively outside the bounds of academic writing. In addition, the final paper for the Collection of Delights asks students to react more formally to some of the texts from the course, tying the ideas they gleaned to their own experiences. At this point, the students will be synthesizing knowledge from various texts and placing them in conversation with one another. We anticipate that the Free Verse texts will be reflected in that final academic paper.

CONCLUSION

At their best, shared intellectual experiences like Ways of Knowing create deep and lasting impacts on students. They also play a role in shaping the canon of voices that are included in mapping exemplary thinkers and world movers. Including the voices of prisoners and incarcerated youth opens the canon to include other voices and experiences that are also important. As scholars and students concerned with responding to injustice in our communities, we can bear witness to the stories and voices of incarcerated youth. Incorporating publications like the ones in Free Verse introduces into the honors classroom an opportunity to have a major impact on both honors students and incarcerated youth.

Another benefit to the students who engage with texts in the ways that Amelia Hawes and Jorgia Hawthorne did during 2020/21 is a profound sense of agency when they realize that they have the power to mold and shape curriculum and when they are allowed the freedom to help share and teach texts that have expanded their own way of understanding the world. This project connects students to their larger community, but it also engages them with the honors program at the pedagogical and administrative levels. Further inquiry may prove that curricular innovations such as weaving the Free Verse project into Ways of Knowing increases retention in honors and that it increases students' sense of belonging.

When designing community-engaged experiences and courses, the community partner needs to shape the project. Relationships should be generative, not transactional. Ideally these partnerships will be sustained over long periods of time so that each stakeholder can better understand one another and develop current and future projects iteratively. When honors students lead and develop these projects, they contribute to involving other students in and out of the classroom.

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