Larissa Pahomov

Building a Collective Understanding of Prisons

The degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons.
—Fyodor Dostoyevsky, The House of the Dead

his quote from Fyodor Dostoyevsky greets my tenth-grade students when they enter the classroom on the first day of our Prisons unit. I read it to them several times, write it on the board, and then leave them to respond in their journals.

The wording of the quote makes its meaning difficult for some students to grasp; many of them puzzle over it for a while. Some choose to ignore it and freewrite instead. When ten minutes have passed, I ask them for their thoughts on the prompt. Most of the students focus on the individuals in prison, with statements like “prisoners broke the law, which shows our society is troubled” or “prisons are dangerous, which shows how violent people can be.”

All of the responses are valid, but they reveal that students are not thinking about the larger constructs behind prisons and society—at least, not to the degree that this unit will encourage them to.

As a teacher who values critical thinking and getting students to see the bigger picture, I look forward to pushing their thinking on this topic. Sometimes it feels like I’ve got a big box of figurative dynamite hidden beneath my desk—if students have a hard-and-fast notion about the way the world works, I am there to blow it up. (It can be as simple as one question, like, “Why don’t men wear skirts?”)

Getting students to a new understanding, though, can be tricky. I want students to become more aware of the systems and structures around them, but I don’t want to push them toward a particular worldview or, worse yet, make them feel like they are under attack and have them shut down. This feels especially true for this unit. Prisons may be under-discussed in schools, but that doesn’t mean that students don’t have preconceived, and sometimes deeply personal, ideas about what’s going on with our justice and penal systems.

So, on this first day, I listen carefully and say little. I want to learn where students are in their thinking. After that, my hope is that we can work together to build a more thorough understanding of prisons and imprisonment.

Unit Overview

The core reading of this unit pairs a canonical text—Night by Elie Wiesel—with selections from Finding Freedom by Jarvis Jay Masters, an inmate currently on death row, encourages students to critically examine the purposes and effects of imprisonment.
up on the wrong side of history. To understand the prisons of today, we need to hear from those currently incarcerated.

The Prisons Unit is framed around the following essential questions:

- What is the role of prisons in society?
- What does freedom mean?
- Can we understand things that we do not personally experience?

I also hope to challenge common attitudes toward prisoners today, many of which revealed themselves in our opening conversation—that lawbreakers can no longer contribute meaningfully to society; that those who have done wrong should be locked up and ignored. This mindset belies the reality of our current penal system. The United States currently boasts the largest prison population in the world (Walmsley) with 1 in 200 behind bars in a state or federal facility (Guerino, Harrison, and Sabol). To ignore this population is to close the door on an increasingly relevant portion of our society.

Part of what makes this focus possible is our setting. I teach English at Science Leadership Academy, a public high school in Philadelphia. The school opened its doors to students just seven years ago and was designed to encourage both inquiry and critical pedagogy. To those ends, there is a thematic curriculum for each grade level—for sophomores, it’s “systems,” and the Prisons Unit comes out of this broader, grade-wide thematic curriculum. The essential questions for this year’s sophomore curriculum are the following:

- How are systems created and defined?
- How do systems shape the world?
- What is the role of the individual within the system?

This approach means that literature is not just about narrative and vocabulary—it is the medium we use to take a hard look at the world around us and identify the structures that hold it up.

I choose to save the Prisons Unit until the end of the year for a few reasons. The subject matter, which students initially assume will be depressing, hooks them in a way that no other topic does—and keeps the last month of class engaging. And it strikes a nerve. Our student body hails from every neighborhood in Philadelphia and comes from vastly different socioeconomic, racial, and educational backgrounds. Some students have had intense personal experiences with the American justice and prison system, while others are quite distanced from it. These students have spent the year building a classroom community with each other; by now they are as trusting as they are going to get, and this allows for more open dialogue and debate.

**First Impressions**

After talking about the Dostoyevsky quote, we transition into a game of “Where Do You Stand?” Students are already familiar with the format—I read them a statement, and the students debate the statement openly as they choose which side of the room to stand on; if they agree, they move to one side of the room; if they disagree, they move to the opposite side. For the purposes of the game, there is no middle ground.

Students consistently list this game as one of their favorite activities in our year-end survey, and they jump willingly into the fray; each statement I make prompts vigorous debate. “People who are a threat to society should be imprisoned”—students pick apart the meaning of threat. “Prisoners deserve access to education”—students argue whether prisoners should get a second chance when education budgets in our own city are being cut. “I would choose life in prison over death”—strong opinions over what makes life worth living rise to the surface.

This activity is also a place where students rely on their trust and respect for each other. In response to the statement “prisons are meant to be punishment,” one student once called out, “prisons
Building a Collective Understanding of Prisons

have been a punishment for me—my father has been incarcerated my whole life.” Moments like this one are often the most revelatory during this unit—they encourage the class to broaden their thinking and consider outward effects of imprisonment, not just what’s going on behind bars. Likewise, in response to “the American justice system is fair,” students often share tales of family and friends who have been the victims of violent crime, only to watch the accused attackers go free.

Like the opening Dostoyevsky quote and journal, the “Where Do You Stand?” activity is a way for us to see what people currently think about issues regarding prisons and incarceration—students are mostly just sharing their thoughts, and because it’s a “game,” the students have a little fun with it. However, moments also occur when they already begin to push against each other’s beliefs. Those who favor harsh penalties for convicted criminals have to face off with their peers who have family members behind bars. And someone almost always brings up the financial cost of prisons and the effects of increased privatization. (If they don’t, this is one spot where I will often break my silence and ask the students if they know how much prisons cost, and maybe mention the phrase industrial complex—a little stick of dynamite I keep in reserve to raise the stakes of the debate, if needed.)

When the prompts are finished, the students settle back into their seats, and I tell them that I’m going to introduce them to an author who is currently on death row.

I show them a photo of Jarvis Jay Masters, currently imprisoned at San Quentin in California and on death row for his involvement with the murder of a prison guard. I then read them the foreword of Finding Freedom, which was written by Masters’s lawyer. The essay provides a brief overview of his life, without sugar-coating his story; his lawyer was frightened as she read about his record of robbing public shops and eateries. She writes, “I’m glad I wasn’t in Taco Bell when he came through” (Chavis vii). The foreword also emphasizes the important role that writing has played for Masters in his new life, including a scene of freewriting that closely mirrors the journaling we do in class.

After these opening activities, students are naturally interested in Masters. Some of them verbally sympathize with him and his case, while others remain silent. As we read on, I emphasize that I don’t want to fall into a debate about whether Masters should be on death row or in prison. I don’t want to devalue their opinions on the matter—and I provide news links where they can get more information about his case, if they’re interested—but his book focuses on his reality since being sentenced, and that is the core of what we explore in the unit.

Digging Deeper

As the unit continues, students are assigned selections from Finding Freedom to read at home. The book is written as a series of short vignettes and the conversational style of writing is highly accessible. We typically spend two weeks in this phase of the unit.

The take-home reading assignments are supplemented in class with a variety of activities and nonfiction reading. These tasks are designed to help students build their own knowledge base about prisons and imprisonment, and they serve as a counterbalance to Masters’s anecdotal descriptions of life behind bars. Students are given the freedom to explore the many databases of the Bureau of Justice Statistics and a variety of New York Times articles on prisons and imprisonment. During the reading period, they are instructed to take notes on the most important points of the article they selected. They then have time to share their findings with their classmates in groups of four.

This collective building of meaning continues as students are given samples of letters written by prisoners to Books Through Bars, a local organization that helps provide incarcerated people with reading material. Students read a letter with a partner and are asked to reflect on the following questions: What is this person’s background? What is his or her level of education? Once they have agreed on their answers, I then ask them: Now how did you come to those conclusions, and are they valid?

These kinds of probing questions are mirrored in the students’ daily journal prompts and in the reading reflection questions I assign: In
what ways is Masters’s life in prison like ours in the “real world”? When do you feel most free? What is your prison? Students are encouraged to explore the parallels between their own world and life on death row—which has led to more than a few riveting discussions about how school may or may not be a form of imprisonment, and what it takes to rise above one’s prescribed routine. Masters’s own path included a conversion to Buddhism, which encouraged students to explore the relationship between faith, freedom, and restriction, with many students offering examples from their own varied religious practices.

When time allows for it, we also take a field trip to Eastern State Penitentiary, a prison-turned-museum that is walking distance from the school. Eastern State operated from 1829 to 1971 and was one of the first facilities designed for solitary confinement. On the tour, students can witness the many stages of prison reform that the United States has gone through by looking at the changes in design of the buildings and their interiors. As students follow the tour guide, they take the opportunity to physically insert themselves into prison life—What would it feel like to live in this cell? To be led blindfolded down this hall?

Throughout these activities, there is plenty of time for think-pair-share and small-group reflection, but all-class discussion is mostly avoided—students are in the process of collecting as much information as they can, and I want to avoid the
Building a Collective Understanding of Prisons

generic “What does the reading mean?” conversations that are often the backbone of the English classroom. Once they have concluded their reading and research, however, students participate in a Harkness method discussion to finish this part of the unit.

A method developed at Phillips Exeter Academy, the Harkness is a student-led activity where “the teacher acts as little as possible, serving mostly as an observer” (“The Harkness Discussion”). Criteria for a successful Harkness include “everyone participates, and more or less equally” and “students take risks and dig for new meanings.” Before the day of the discussion, we spend close to a whole class period reflecting on the students’ strengths and weaknesses in conversation, where students are given prompts such as, What do we do about the quieter voices in the room? and the students must talk through some strategies. I also explain that, during the Harkness, I will “pause” the discussion periodically to give them time to reflect on how the activity is going and brainstorm strategies for improvement.

Though my students are familiar with and comfortable in a teacher-supported discussion, they initially struggle being totally on their own. They adapt quickly, though, and maintain a high level of engagement throughout the conversation. Students tend to focus on how they would choose to live their lives if they were in prison. They also present fascinating questions that go to the core of Masters’s text, which they have sometimes brainstormed in advance. Questions posed in this year’s discussion included Does changing your life around in prison make you a changed person? and Can peace coexist alongside violence? These lines of inquiry led to stimulating, dynamic conversation between students, moments where they could challenge and push each other’s thinking from a place of respect. The ideas unearthed in this process build on each other to help them construct a collective understanding, not just share what each person thinks.

From Inmates to Concentration Camps

Can you understand what you don’t experience personally? This journal prompt begins our transition into reading Elie Wiesel’s Night. Students are typically divided by the question, sometimes passionately so. What is the difference between knowledge and understanding? What is the difference between sympathy and empathy?

These questions are swirling in the students’ minds as I read aloud Wiesel’s preface, which he wrote for the most recent edition of his book. In describing his own struggle after surviving the Holocaust, and his drive to share his experiences, he writes that “only those who experienced Auschwitz will know what it was. Others will never know. But could they at least understand?” (4).

It’s relevant that Wiesel does not answer his own question. Here we are, reading a horrific chapter in the story of the world—one that students have been learning the facts and figures about concurrently in history class—without any guarantee that we’ll be able to get our minds around it. I don’t read Wiesel’s preface as a personal challenge, but some students do. They want to get it, and they tear through the book.

Though no student has ever asked this question during the intro, I explicitly state that this unit does not mean to equate the experiences of modern American inmates with prisoners in Nazi concentration camps. What it does intend to do is give students several reference points to consider what a society’s choices about incarceration say about its deeper values and goals.

The final task in the unit is a second Harkness discussion, two weeks after the first one and four weeks since the start of the unit. With the experiences of the last round fresh in their minds, the class tends to allow for more back-and-forth and natural conflict between speakers—not the kind that devolves into bickering, but honest discussion that helps push the thinking of the participants.

In this conversation, there is much work to be done—students pose burning questions about the nature of faith, family, and hope in the face of imprisonment and destruction. Students are also encouraged to weave in outside sources we have read, or even pull from Finding Freedom to compare and contrast the mindsets of Wiesel and Masters in the face of possible lifetime imprisonment or death. Students still share their personal reactions to the experiences of each author, but they also take time to see the big picture in the way that the unit encourages them to. This year, the conversation often shifted to questions of transference. Why did these
authors choose to write, and why are we reading? What do we gain from their experiences? How can it inform our lives today?

An Artistic Mini-Project

The last days of the Prison Unit are capped with an artistic mini-project. Students are invited to create a visual response to any idea we have explored (see fig. 1). Like the beginning of the unit, this gives students a chance to articulate their current understanding of prisons and imprisonment—and also see how they’ve evolved. Some students are immersed in literal comprehension—they create direct interpretations of scenes from the texts. Others are engaging on a more thematic level, finding symbols for violence, inclusion and exclusion, faith, and doubt. Some students are busy turning the lens on our own learning and create works that challenge the curriculum itself—a collage about the killing fields in Cambodia, or a comic where a student asks “Who chooses what we get to learn?” The artwork is hung in the hallway, and the year ends with a “gallery day” where students present their work to their peers and briefly discuss what inspired them. Students don’t necessarily connect with every work, but time is provided for them to at least consider each one.

Big Understandings

This process mirrors what has been our task all along—we have each been crafting our individual understanding of prisons and imprisonment, and then also sharing that understanding with others to build a larger and stronger collective framework—something that lives on beyond a single person. In his book Critical Pedagogy for Social Justice, John

FIGURE 1. A visual response to the unit by Korah Lovelace.
Smyth writes that “Freire’s central notion is that ‘hope’, as an idea, ‘is rooted in [our] incompleteness’, and that what makes us human is the ‘constant search’ to become more fulfilled. This is something we pursue collaboratively and in communion with others” (3; italics in original). This impulse is reflected in what students write informally about the Prisons Unit in their year-end surveys:

- “I enjoyed all of the deep personal conversations we had about the book, this was truly the most touching and memorable unit.”
- “Finding out about people and their personal experiences and how it made them feel, was really interesting. I don’t know but in some way I try to put myself in their shoes just to see if I could manage and honestly I don’t think I would be able to.”

As for their “big understandings” at the end of the unit, students also learned to go slowly and value each other when building meaning:

- “We need to always look at things from multiple perspectives before we make a decision.”
- “The Harkness discussion . . . was really civilized, funny, and we were learning and practicing on how to listen and respect other people’s opinions at the same time.”

Comments like this suggest that students are not just learning about prisons, but about how to properly engage with the world. And they push my thinking as well, even after several years of teaching this unit. Until I started teaching at Science Leadership Academy, I didn’t know an English class could do something so radical—the core of this unit was graciously handed to me by another teacher when I arrived, and over the years I have made it my own.

I read Night back in high school, and Crime and Punishment, too. But we never discussed the “why” behind prisons. At most just the “what.”

Focusing on that “why” is at the core of my ability to raise the students’ critical awareness—but that’s only the first step of a much longer process. The real task is helping my students rebuild their understanding in a way that works for them. Helping them step inside and deconstruct the ideas behind imprisonment can keep them critical of a system that is too often passively accepted or rendered invisible by the society that created it.

Note
1. Heather Hurst was present in my classroom for the 2011–12 school year as a PhD candidate and researcher. These quotes are from her transcriptions of entire class periods.

Works Cited

Larissa Pahomov teaches English and Journalism at Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. She shares many of her lesson plans and reflections online at http://lpahomov.wordpress.com. Email her at LPahomov@scienceleadership.org.

READWritethink CONNECTION Lisa Storm Fink, RWT
In “Using Student-Centered Comprehension Strategies with Elie Wiesel’s Night,” students work in small groups and use reciprocal teaching strategies as they read and discuss Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel’s memoir Night. Everyone in the classroom takes a turn assuming the “teacher” role, as the class works with four comprehension strategies: predicting, question generating, summarizing, and clarifying. http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/using-student-centered-comprehension-884.html