

# Unlocking Minds

*by Jenny Greene and Jill Knapp*

**T**he Princeton Teaching Initiative at Princeton University is an all-volunteer group formed to teach for-credit college courses in the New Jersey state prison system. The courses are coordinated with the Mercer County Community College (MCCC), which accredits the courses and maintains the students' transcripts. Volunteer professors, postdoctoral fellows, staff, graduate and undergraduate students from Princeton, Rutgers University, and other institutions teach three- or four-credit courses each semester, with all the classroom instruction by teachers with a master's degree or higher. The credits can be transferred to other state colleges and, together with courses taught by MCCC and the College of New Jersey, can lead to an associate's degree..

When I tell people that I teach algebra in a prison, they typically respond with a mixture of awe and fear. It is true that superficially the classroom experience is different. We must pass through metal detectors, locked metal gates, and countless officers to reach our classrooms. We cannot wear gang colors or open-toed shoes to class. Chaos is never far away: classes never start on time, and occasionally are canceled or curtailed due to trouble in other parts of the facility. The hallways are perpetually noisy and often distracting, particularly when friends from other parts of the facilities wander by to chat. We are regularly locked in the classroom as

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The artist C.A. Dye is currently serving a 20-year sentence in a Georgia prison. His paintings, as well as others, can be found at the Safe Streets Art Foundation, [safestreets.org](http://safestreets.org).

some incident is resolved in the halls outside. Most devastating is that we routinely lose our best students in the middle of the semester when they are transferred.

But we walk into classrooms that are full of signs of learning, with maps and time-lines and essays hanging on the walls. As soon as the class begins, the students are just students, and our job is simple: teach them algebra. The challenges are the same as in any classroom—keeping the students focused and engaged, balancing the competing needs of students of differing educational backgrounds and aptitude, and continuously monitoring whether students are learning the material.

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I always go home exhausted from an evening of teaching, but have never once feared for my safety.

This is not to say that there are no substantive differences between teaching inmates and teaching Ivy League students. In general, the inmates are far more motivated. These students have chosen to take algebra and they really want to learn. They do not take their success for granted; not in our classes, nor in their lives. These classes really mean something to them: they represent a ticket to a normal life when their sentences end. It doesn't mean that they are always gifted at algebra, although some are talented. It does mean that they take learning seriously.

Teaching in the prison is incredibly rewarding work. One of my favorite success stories was a student I will call B. While B. was a bit older than most of the students (and thus ineligible to take most classes because of federal funding rules designed to funnel resources to prisoners under the age of 25), he was absolutely determined to work toward a degree, and he took every class we offered. However, B. did not take naturally to algebra. He was a very spirited participant in class, and sometimes it was necessary to ask him to give his peers a chance. He was wary of using algebra as a tool: when confronted with a word problem he would fill the page with trial-and-error numerical attempts to solve it. He barely squeaked through the introductory class. But by the middle of the second semester, an amazing thing happened. B. started to understand algebra and use algebraic principles to solve problems. He even started helping the other students with their homework. There is no question that these analytic skills will serve B. well outside after he is released.

## BECOMING MATH LITERATE

Math illiteracy has reached epic proportions in the U.S. and is reflected in the prison population. Mastery of basic algebra is a necessary skill for almost any job, but we teach our students more than the mechanics of doing a math problem; we teach them to recognize patterns and think about problems in a whole new way. In our pre-algebra class, we spend a full week on geometry, and we have the students work through basic proofs themselves. After leading them through the proof that the sum of the angles of a triangle equals 180 degrees, I ask them whether any aspect of our proof is specific to the triangle I have drawn on the board. No. So,

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have we derived a property of just one triangle? No. It dawns on them that we have derived something basic and true about all triangles. “Whoa.” This is a magical moment for them, as they realize that with mathematical reasoning they themselves can derive basic facts and that mathematical reasoning is fundamental to more than just contrived word problems. Further, math carries its own built-in system of checks and balances. They derive self-confidence from the ability to validate their own work, as well as the skill of differentiating between reproducible and verifiable ideas on the one hand and opinion on the other.

The rewards of high-stakes prison teaching are enormous. Many of our prisoners struggle with the results of a lifetime of being told they are worthless. This is far less common in our Ivy League cohorts. When we teach in the prison, we are teaching study skills, focused work habits and other life skills. As teachers, we watch our students blossom, not just in their mastery of the material, but in the mastery of life skills.

The gratification we get from teaching prisoners are exemplified by the case of A. His attendance in the first course he took, for students with insufficient math background, was irregular and his work perfunctory. When A. received a “D” on his final paper, he came up and shouted angrily “What is this? I came to the whole course, right?” (Expletives deleted). “You never did any homework. You barely scraped 50 percent on the exams. You are lucky I was in a good mood and you didn’t get an F. You have a fine brain in that head of yours. What you are going to do is take the course again and this time get an A.” And there he was at the beginning of the next semester. That “D” from the last semester turned into an “A.” And there were two more “A”s in subsequent semesters. His turnaround was not limited to math; A. also excelled in the humanities courses we teach. Nor was his excellence limited to an understanding of the material; he also helped the other stu-

dents in the classes. He cajoled them to come to class and helped explain confusing concepts. He's now released, on parole, and headed to college in the fall. To be sure, not all situations come out this well, but A. is not a rare exception.

#### TEACHERS FIND REWARDS, TOO

The benefits of our program accrue not just to the students but also to the teachers. First, teaching is an art that benefits from practice and feedback—and our algebra students provide vociferous feedback. Second, our algebra students also come to the classroom with vast differences in their preparation for learning. Some

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are math wizards. Others have not seen arithmetic in 10 years. To challenge the advanced students and encourage those falling behind, while maintaining discipline in an already challenging environment, exercises our teaching skills in a way that teaching the more homogeneous Ivy League students rarely does. Third, teaching students with extremely diverse experiences makes us look afresh at the material we teach. Often, common tools used to teach new concepts are foreign to them (compound interest, for instance) and the work and thought that we put into finding universal analogs serves us well when we get back to our normal classrooms.

Our students are right that college courses provide a ticket to escaping prison. In this country, one in eight young (college-age) black men and one in 20 young Hispanic men are currently behind bars, and a black man has more than one chance in three of being imprisoned at some point in his life. They inherently recognize what the demographers tell us: that recidivism decreases by approximately 20 percent through education programs on the inside, with even higher rates for college-level education. Yet even as incarceration rates have climbed, support for prison education has declined precipitously, and has essentially disappeared at the post-secondary level. Inmate access to Pell grants was terminated as one of the provisions of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (the Biden Act), and support for the 1998 Incarcerated Individuals Act (the Specter Act) has been cancelled in this year's federal budget. These cuts come in the face of compelling evidence that prison education programs are a cost-effective way to mitigate criminal behavior. The reasons are obvious; we teach prisoners math skills and life skills. By providing college training to inmates, we are increasing the chance that they, and their children, will live productive, crime-free lives.

The statistical facts acquire a face when we look at what becomes of our stu-

dents. We do not track them formally, but we do work closely with the Mountainview Project at Rutgers University. This wonderful program enrolls prior inmates into their four-year AB program, building on the community college work that we have helped them achieve inside. Our former students succeed; their dropout rate is smaller, and GPAs higher, than those of the typical Rutgers student. These students sometimes send emails to us charting their progress. While it is always gratifying to watch former students do well, nothing can quite match the experience of watching an inside student enroll in college and watching him or her thrive there; the stakes were so much higher and the obstacles to overcome so much more daunting than those facing our typical Ivy League student.

A couple of years ago, I was meeting with a senior colleague, and my prison teaching came up in casual conversation. What was I doing, she wanted to know, wasting my talents teaching something as basic as algebra. I could not disagree with her more. There is no better purpose for my analytic skills than increasing math literacy in this country. And there is no population that needs these skills more than incarcerated youth. 