

# School on Probation: Teaching That Changes Lives

by Taylor Stoehr

**F**or the past dozen years I've been teaching, along with other volunteers, in a program called "Changing Lives Through Literature,"<sup>1</sup> serving the Dorchester District Court of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Changing Lives began as a single experiment in New Bedford in 1991 and has spread entirely by word of mouth to a dozen other jurisdictions in Massachusetts and courts in six other states. Our students are probationers of the court and they receive six months off their sentences after completing the 10-week course. The actual approach and curriculum vary from place to place, according to staff and student body. I work with three or four other facilitators in a men's group averaging 12 or 15 graduates each semester, most of them people of color, reflecting Dorchester demographics.

We select readings with our students' inner city experience in mind. The primary text is Frederick Douglass' *Narrative of the Life of an American Slave*, which serves as the starting point for discussion of problems faced by the students themselves: poverty and racism, the struggle for social justice, family breakdown, the weakening of community bonds, and dwindling spiritual sustenance. Short supplementary readings by other authors—African-American and White, American and foreign, contemporary and classic—clarify issues Douglass raises by putting them in a broader context, and a writing assignment helps us focus on their relevance today. After reading how Douglass describes his childhood, and how

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Malcolm X, Bill Russell, Maxim Gorky, or Leo Tolstoy describe theirs, students are asked to state their own opinion of what is necessary for a normal childhood, and who has the responsibility to provide it. What was your childhood like? What kind of a father do you want to be? Those are the implied questions. We also ask how a man like Frederick Douglass or Malcolm X finds himself. “Where do people get their courage, self-esteem, and righteousness?”

Like most alternative sentencing experiments, the appeal of Changing Lives is strongest for those who know the revolving door of the criminal justice system most intimately: judges, probation officers, and of course offenders themselves.

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Obviously, for all of them the primary aim is to reduce recidivism, and the evidence so far is that the usual rate of re-arrest is halved for our graduates. That is certainly to the good, but I want to address another kind of concern that arises in such a program.

It sounds nice to say “Changing Lives through Literature.” You could also call it being “sentenced to school,” as the newspapers do in their feature stories. Is our program just another round of schooling, sending probationers back where things first went wrong for so many of them, baffled and humiliated kids, now in adult bodies? The courts want to teach delinquents “a lesson” just as school used to do, though with a heavier hand because mistakes have become offenses. Whatever alternative phrasing we may invent for it, these men are certainly being asked to submit to re-education, remediation, rehabilitation: another dose of schooling that assumes there is something wrong with them. Given their typical histories and present crises, it’s not surprising when probationers agree with the diagnosis, regarding themselves as failures in both school and life, but this doesn’t mean they want to be reprocessed. The educational sorting and labeling system put its “rejected” stamp on most of them long ago, withholding the rewards that more docile pupils collect after investing 12 to 20 years in school. Although we might wish to solve their personal, social, and economic problems by trying once again to put them through the mill, like flawed products bumped off the conveyor belt, this technique will not work.

If you ask Dorchester probationers, they’ll tell you that more and better schooling is the only route to social change. They favor policies like affirmative action and scholarships for minorities, though most of them would prefer simple fairness and equal funding for rich and poor, no matter what race or ethnicity.

Some of them also realize that pointing to inadequacies in education can serve to hide or excuse deeper and more directly remediable problems of poverty and racism. In any case, most of our students are convinced that it is too late for them to benefit from more schooling. And no matter how much they like the Changing Lives program, their faith in education is entirely focused on their children and has the same ring to it as a fantasy about winning the lottery.

“More and better schooling” is pie in the sky in several ways, for even if the money and the personnel were available, and the effort politically expedient, upgrading inner city schools would not change social roles and economic fates for

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more than a very few youngsters—not while educational policy remains obsessed with tests and grades, rewarding only the winners of a contest that most people are bound to lose. Any ranking system automatically guarantees that the vast majority will end up somewhere between second best and last. Not everyone can get an A. There will always be some who get a B or C, and even without the class and ethnic bias endemic in curriculum and pedagogy, still others will fall below the level of normal: children whose genetic endowment, health, stage of development, family and cultural background, or simple bad luck do not match up with the expectations and format of the traditional classroom, thus labeling them ever after as incompetent or incorrigible. It’s a self-validating system. High-achievers on tests are handed on to be groomed for other kinds of success, while low-achievers, to protect what’s left of their pride, typically close down curiosity and initiative, whether by pretending to understand and care about their studies, or by sullenly refusing to go through the motions, choosing to be outcasts rather than losers.

The following story told by one Changing Lives student named Neville illustrates how this part of the system works to brand and chastise the miscreant:

I loved school, but I just felt like I couldn’t learn for some reason! I had so many dreams as a little boy. I will never forget once when school was just about to let out, they passed out report cards in the Third Grade. And all the kids, my friends, were so happy about what they had gotten. And I couldn’t wait to get home to show the family! When I opened to see what I had, which were all Fs, my teachers saw me just cover my face and say NAW! They let the class out and came to me, and gave me a long talk about trying a little harder next time if it meant so much.

This memory dramatizes what happens to many students more gradually dur-

ing their years in school. Marching in place to the lockstep of lesson plans, being tested, graded, and exhorted, finally kills the spirit and blames the victim.

I can hear teachers replying, “Yes, but *did* Neville ever really try?” “How do we know for sure that his failure resulted from traditional classroom calisthenics and not from attention deficit disorder or a dysfunctional family?” “And after all, where’s the borderline between a conscientious teacher’s urging him to take responsibility for his aspirations and blaming him for failure?”

To my mind, these are all just more sophisticated ways of throwing the burden back on him—body chemistry, family life, spiritual sloth—as if these weren’t part of the human condition, the baggage every eight-year-old brings to school along with his lunch. Of course Neville wasn’t really trying! Neither were his teachers, who had a 150-year-old compulsory education system to back them up. When Neville’s teachers convinced him that his failure was his own fault, the result was not that he tried harder, but that he gave up trying altogether, as he explained later in the semester:

I would say I’m a weak person, and only because I really never learned how to read or write like others, which has kept my self-esteem down for many of years! And I really don’t know how to spell. I believe if I was strong like others that really don’t do anything with the smarts they have. Me, I feel like I was let out somewhere along the line.

No doubt the grown man in front of the judge will have done something much more reprehensible than the boy crying at his desk, probably breaking his own moral code as well as society’s. He knows it and is usually ready to acknowledge



his guilt, though perhaps in the same confused and despairing way an eight-year-old admits he deserves the row of Fs on his report card. Be that as it may, once judged and sentenced, the schoolboy/probationer goes through life with the black mark on his record. With “F” it’s hard to get a good job; with “felony” it’s hard to get any job.

Back in school for our program and now faced with probation officers as well as teachers, a “weak person” like Neville won’t risk being made a fool of again if he can help it. Are we hoping to reverse his downward spiral? If so, what can we offer him that doesn’t threaten his autonomy and self-respect by once more taking his

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Changing Lives confronts students with ambiguity as well as indignity: Is the program actually part of their punishment, disguised as rehabilitation? For men who may not have finished high school and perhaps never read through an entire book, the prospect of 10 weeks of “Literature” can be daunting. Maybe six months on probation would be easier. Ironically, quite a few of these men are proud of their street smarts and can hold their own in any contest that depends on a quick mind and a glib tongue. They come into our classroom with an attitude, some on the attack, others relying on their wits and charm to convince us that they are doing their homework when they are shirking it, and always a few who drift to the back of the room and pretend to be asleep. This is the way life has gone for many of them, dodging and bluffing, evasiveness alternating with bravado.

**H**ow can we get such seasoned cynics to give Frederick Douglass a chance? As recidivism rates have proved over and over, it’s hard to learn through coercion, and old-fashioned schooling has succeeded in alienating our students from anything that sounds like capitulation to history, literature, or ideas. But because their resistance to sustained reflection on the experience of others typically began in school, our probationers do need to work through a new set of attitudes toward education. Not for the sake of catching up with their former classmates, but to find ways of regaining respect, while dealing with the anger, humiliation, and self-pity that have been the chief results of their schooling thus far. Initial resistance is not a bad start and may even be essential to this process.

Keep in mind that these are not hardened men. They’ve been recruited to our program because their probation officers think they’re ready to turn a corner, frightened by prison or by sudden moral vertigo. A few are still cocky, more are

simply numb, but smiling or deadpan, most probationers come to Changing Lives deeply shaken by their encounter with judgment and punishment. As one man wrote recently,

Being in jail is like being dead with your eyes open. Just like if you're dead at a grave. People come to visit you, bring you gifts, cry after visiting, and on the street maybe twice a week your name will come up and they'll reminisce over you and spill some liquor for you. But don't they do that for the deceased too?

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If there is ever a time when a man can admit that he needs to change, it is after he has hit bottom like this. In his own moment of trial and despair, Frederick Douglass put it this way:

Behold a man transformed into a brute! . . . God, deliver me! Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave? I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, get clear, I'll try it. . . . I have only one life to lose. . . . It may be that my misery in slavery will only increase my happiness when I get free. There is a better day coming.

What Frederick Douglass did was to resist punishment, the whipping that a professional slave-breaker set out to inflict, to teach him a lasting lesson. Resistance led Douglass to a renewed sense of manhood, and ultimately to his freedom. This is a complicated lesson for men who have never been under the lash but whose manhood and freedom are certainly in jeopardy.

**W**hatever the causes, once a man's spirit has been broken, the feeling of despair is pretty much the same for everyone, guilty or innocent. The night we arrive at the turning point in Douglass' *Narrative*, we also discuss a Tolstoy story about a very different sort of man, "Korney Vasiliev," whose life goes to pieces when he discovers his wife has been unfaithful. Drunkenness and anger lead to brutal battering of his wife and, accidentally, his infant daughter, after which he wanders for years as a homeless beggar. But when Korney finally comes home to die, he manages to ask for and offer forgiveness, and his death coincides with his spiritual rebirth.

We ask our students that night, "Why do some people cling to their anger, pride, or self-pity, while others are able to find something new to believe in?" It

takes us eight weeks to get to the point where our students are ready to talk about what it means to hit bottom, to be at the end of one's strength, spiritless and beaten. By this time, they know Frederick Douglass pretty well, having watched him grow up, learning to read on the sly from White boys in the street, standing on the auction block, discovering what it is to be a slave. Tolstoy's story of spiritual crisis also stirs our probationers because it reminds them of their own sorrows and defeat, just as Douglass' example renews their courage.

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claim our program makes to "Change Lives through Literature." However, it's not how many pages we turn, but whether the reading can serve as a framework for understanding and compassion. Douglass' victory over the slave mentality in store for him encourages readers to confront their own crisis and despair. You might say that his *Narrative* provides the musical score for a chorus to which each man adds his own voice. That's what literature and culture are all about. In any case, by the eighth week of the semester our class members have developed the mutual trust they need to tell each other their own stories of hitting bottom, in response to Douglass' desperate tale.

On the first night of each new semester, almost all the questions about Changing Lives have to do with the amount of work it will entail, the exact nature of the reward, and the precise provisions of the contract (to them, like the terms of a "sentence"). Puzzled by our motives and reluctant to commit themselves, many of the men openly resist what they expect to be another round of schooling, not only complaining about the homework but also asking just what we mean by "Changing Lives"? And why are we there, what's in it for the teachers? Once they ask those questions, they are beginning to understand that this class will be very different from what they're used to. These are not questions they ever thought to ask in high school.

We give them mixed signals. They can see for themselves the familiar school-room chairs, blackboards, and "blue-books" used everywhere for student writing. We explain the rules of attendance, homework, and class exercises. We hand out copies of Douglass' *Narrative*. Then we tell them that there will be no tests, corrections, or grades. Is it school or isn't it? Our mixed signals remind students why they have always hated school, but also invite them to reconsider their attitudes

toward some of its practices, long regarded as meaningless drudgery rather than a challenge to the mind. Our goal is to create a “safe emergency situation” with many of the typical alarm-bells still ringing—homework, writing in class, recitation—but no fire, no police cars racing to the scene. Each student will move at his own pace, without the threat of failure.

We do want to reconstitute enough of the system to call forth memories like Neville’s of how things originally went wrong, while at the same time altering the demands and changing the stakes so that students find they can do some

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of the things school “said” they couldn’t do. Once the pressure is diminished and anxiety reduced, ordinary human powers reassert themselves. Our aim is to allow a man to think better of himself, open his mind to a brighter yet realistic vision of his world and his future. Among other things this means freeing students from the illusion that success in school is the only route to respectability. We aren’t trying to get people back on the educational track, but to let them judge for themselves what it would mean to go back to school, or more important, to open their minds to “literature” without the prod of assignments and tests.

I don’t mean to suggest that the change is magical or miraculous. A simple shift in attitude is what we hope will occur. It is of no use whatever to force a man to read a book just because his own weaknesses and strengths are pictured there. He must discover that for himself, as he must also find his own courage to change. To demonstrate, let me quote Neville, so humiliated in third grade, writing now after completing our program:

The most important thing that I’ve learned is that I really can learn. All these years I’ve been thinking that I could not read or write. Here, look at me now! Reading and writing and spelling. And I know some of the things are going to be misspelled, but what really matters is that I keep trying my best.

Although it’s true that part of our safe emergency situation includes reading, writing, and spelling, we are not trying to bring students up to speed in literacy skills. The hard work it cost Neville to meet our assignments had its most important outcome in his recovered self-esteem, not his spelling. Our method is to engage students over their ideas rather than their ability to articulate them. Everything Neville wrote was typed up and responded to by the instructors—his thoughts not corrected but met halfway with our thoughts, in an ongoing dia-

logue. This personal exchange is important to each man, and they pore over the typed pages at the beginning of every class. But the crucial discoveries come during the intense conversations our readings provoke each week, the back and forth that goes on in small group discussions where each man has a voice in the creation of a public world of ideas and opinions.

Ten years' experience has taught us that such conversations are the real core of Changing Lives, but exactly how they will come alive is not predictable. In practice, our small groups sometimes wander off the week's reading, or slide away from the questions posed for writing. No one tries to turn the discussion back to the

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homework or worries about sticking to the subject, as in school with its lesson plans and material to be covered. Digression is often the most direct path to what is really important to each speaker. What students need to talk about comes spontaneously when serious listeners, sharing their concerns, are gathered round.

The troubles and follies leading up to arrest, trial, and punishment have left our probationers with plenty to brood on, but letting go of anger and resentment at what life has dealt them requires someone outside their immediate families to talk seriously with them. In many cases, they no longer trust their friends, and it is only in a room full of strangers that they can speak openly, where they have no image to maintain. Everyone has undergone the same harrowing experiences. No one has to pretend he is better than he is. No one has to mention his war stories, or to display his scars.

Using each other as listeners and witnesses, our students explore just how much of this painful experience they are ready to talk about, surprised to find many others whose lives have been even harder. Staff members also do the reading and writing to better participate in group discussions, and to allow us to take a role that's not merely facilitative. Each of us, including instructors, probation officers, and in some semesters a judge, is ready to tell his story and hear what others think, to fit his piece into the larger picture. If things go right, everyone in the circle takes responsibility for the conversation, and a feeling of membership develops in which the personal can merge with the public. Among other things, this group dynamic helps us steer clear of the confessional style of therapy programs, which no doubt has its uses, but is not part of our method. We avoid putting individuals on the spot, relying instead on the give-and-take of consensus-building to foster mutual trust and shared ethics, the preconditions of belonging to a public world.

A truly democratic classroom can provide a forum for the basic cultural work every society must do for itself, the proving grounds of literacy, taste, and practical ethics, none of which is simply inherited from the culture one is raised in, but must be continually created and renegotiated in public discourse. The primary arena for such cultural work was once the church or the town meeting, the marketplace or the theater. Today, for better or worse, the modern classroom has become one of the few public settings where ideas are taken seriously. Here, if anywhere, standards of conduct can be scrutinized and assessed in literature, history, and philosophy.

Except for our classroom, these men have almost no place in their lives where they can join a public gathering to talk seriously about values, considering them in the light of common experience, and working toward a viable ethics founded on primary community feeling. Such public conversation is disastrously missing in contemporary society, and not just among the men whose lives on the street have led them to the courthouse or jailhouse. Even so, the lack of practice or witnessing direct and honest public speech has not killed the impulse, once the right conditions are provided. Even on our first night, when everyone is full of anxiety and distrust, all that is necessary to revive serious speech is awareness of our common plight, well-lit boundaries, a brief period of quiet meditation and writing, and a small circle of other faces ready to listen.

All students have the right to success in this kind of classroom—not just an opportunity to learn, but active exercise of language, taste, and ethics, finding their own individual powers and ideals in relation to a growing sense of how others speak and judge and evaluate. In the Dorchester program, everything depends on the community our men create together during the semester—being part of a group discovering its virtues and strengths. This social awareness is a source of support and public validation. The goal is not to realize or prove oneself as this or that kind of person, but rather to fashion a group identity that goes beyond labels like Black or White or brown, offender or victim, success or failure. Students profit most of all from the simple act of coming together to talk about their own plight as citizens judged lacking in the virtues that give society its coherence and stability. Struggling to understand what the world offers, demands, owes, or withholds from them, and sharing their opinions with growing respect for other voices and views, they can learn to take themselves seriously in a new way. If they do, their lives will have changed. 

## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> In 2004 Changing Lives Through Literature received the New England Board of Higher Education's highest award, for "Excellence" in program development. Thanks to a substantial National Endowment for the Humanities grant, Changing Lives can now be studied in all its variety, including a detailed account of a semester in Dorchester, online at <http://ctl.umassd.edu>.