



Writing Workshops As Alternative Literacy Education For Incarcerated Women

*“Are you from SpeakOut? Can I come?”
“I wrote this yesterday; will you read it?”
“Can I go next? I have something to share.”*

By Tobi Jacobi

Such requests are common as women (who a few months ago would rarely have claimed the role of writer as their own) clamor for the attention of the writing workshop facilitators. Many incarcerated women have only negative school experience with reading and writing. Few have had the opportunity to explore literacy as a tool for communication, pleasure or change beyond those early school experiences. Writing workshops create a space for such exploration, and a slow but steady resurgence of jail- and prison-based programs is occurring as recovery from the funding cuts of the mid-1990s continues.

One such program, the SpeakOut! Women’s Writing Workshop, was developed in 2004 by the author to engage members of the Larimer County Community Corrections program in literacy work based on life experience and writing as a tool for understanding and change. The program, now facilitated in community corrections housing units, a local jail and with residents at a juvenile recovery facility, is intended to complement and supplement traditional educational opportunities such as pre-GED and GED coursework and is designed specifically to meet the needs of female inmates. Since the program’s inception, more than 350 writers have participated and 10 issues of the *SpeakOut!*

Journal have been published and circulated in local communities. Writing workshops have the potential to engage prisoners — particularly women — in cooperative and collaborative literacy work that demonstrates the reflective and civic skills necessary for success upon release from institutional care.

Unique Needs Female Learners

Incarcerated women are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. correctional system; yet, in many facilities, they have access to the fewest number of educational and vocational programs. Waiting lists abound in many facilities, and some women choose to repeat courses again and again rather than wait for the unlikely addition of new programs.

Consider the following data: According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS), less than 50 percent of female inmates in state facilities have completed high school or attained a GED outside of prison/jail.¹ A 2002 BJS study of recidivism in released prisoners revealed that within three years of release nearly 58 percent of female prisoners were rearrested and nearly 40 percent were reconvicted.² Research conducted during the past two decades has consistently pointed to the relationship between increased

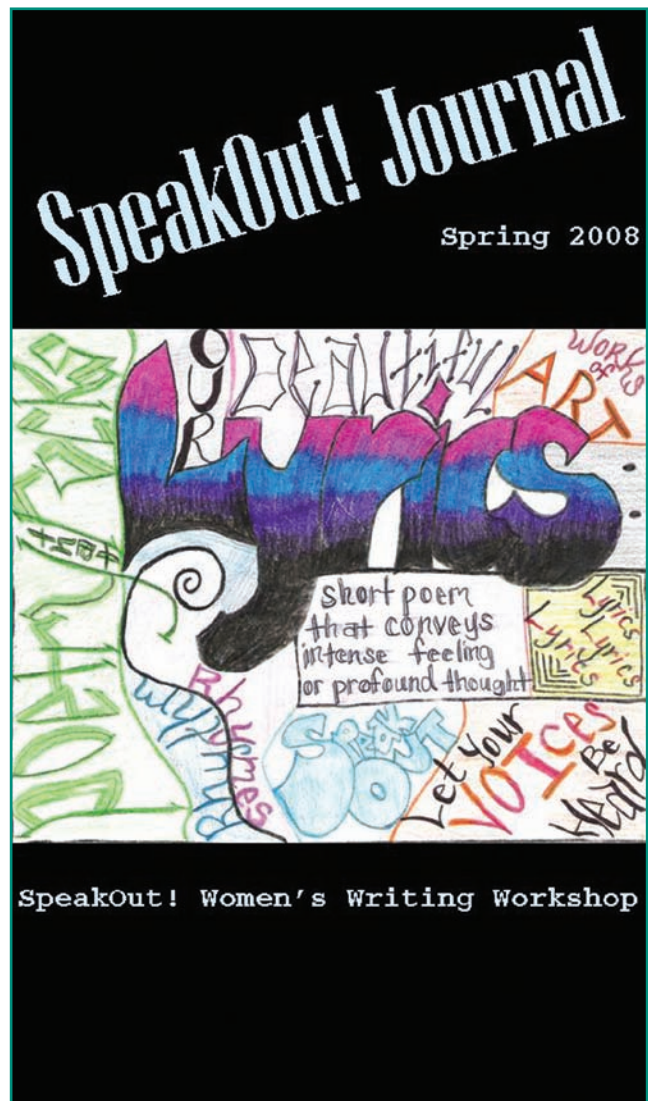
education and decreased recidivism.³ While female inmates will likely never outnumber male inmates, they should have access to training that will decrease their likelihood of recidivism, and that often means different kinds of programming than is offered to their male counterparts.

Female offenders need access to programming for other reasons as well, including motherhood, histories of emotional and physical trauma, and learning style. One prisoner rights organization estimates that “80,000 incarcerated mothers are parents to approximately 200,000 children.”⁴ Writing workshops become an informal space for processing the distance between family members. Many women are also victims of emotional and physical violence, and the workshop becomes a place for sharing stories that are difficult to tell. The risk involved in sharing such narratives is great since many women have never written or spoken about the dangerous situations they have experienced. The act of telling the story is supported by the realization that experiences with violence and abuse do not occur in isolation. In the SpeakOut! workshop, for example, women regularly write about physical or sexual abuse and relief and recognition is mirrored on the faces of others in room. The workshop becomes a space for realizing that other women have experienced similar violence, a space for acknowledgements and healing. This type of programming draws on the cooperative and collaborative learning styles that many women respond well to, and such techniques often result in the formation of communities of support.

Why Writing Workshops as Literacy Education?

Most federal, state and local facilities offer GED training; creative and expository writing workshops can be designed to complement such structured curricula while also offering learners space for individual reflection and the opportunity to work on literacy skills such as reading, writing and critical problem solving. Many writing workshops meet weekly and incorporate both individual and collaborative writing exercises into each session. There are often opportunities to participate in workshop practices such as peer critique, editing and publication design.

Workshop activities might include brainstorming sessions, introductions to writing techniques and styles, basic literacy instruction, feedback sessions, and, of course, lots of time for individual and collaborative composing. Activities such as these encourage writers to reflect upon their lives as well as the impact of their experiences on family, friends and society. While some sessions may result in outcomes with therapeutic value, the focus of a writing workshop is writing and publishing rather than individual therapy. Workshop facilitators are often sponsored by nonprofit groups or affiliation with local community college or university writing programs. While they may have some training in educational practice or human development, facilitators are often experts in adult literacy education or writing theory, or they are practicing writers who can facilitate dynamic sessions based on language experimentation and communication.



The Speak Out! program exposes women to a wide range of writing techniques and styles.

Programs are facilitated based on the needs of the writers, but all highlight reading and writing as critical to literacy development. To connect with and widen the scope of writers' experiences, a diversity of published voices and life experiences are introduced. Some programs such as the College of New Jersey's Women is the Word (and subsequent Freedom Road documentary) have developed curricula specifically focused on women's literature and experience in order to introduce women to both strong writers and female role models such as Audra Lorde and Maya Angelou. Others focus on the craft of writing or a specific genre such as memoir or lifewriting. The SpeakOut! program blends these approaches by offering women exposure to a wide range of written techniques and styles and emphasizing writing as a tool for understanding one's own life. Engagement with published writings, the narratives of female role models and critical social concepts can encourage female prisoners to reimagine the possibilities for their own life and make connections that previously may have gone unstated. These approaches allow workshops to

advance literacy skills in a supportive rather than evaluative setting by fostering collaborative rather than competitive learning environments. For many women, this work has the potential to create space for literate activity as meaningful, necessary and pleasurable rather than a painful memory of red marks and failed attempts.

Civic Engagement Through Peer Mentoring and Leadership

Workshops provide space for challenging traditional classroom (and carceral) hierarchies by presenting opportunities for collaborative learning and leadership. Workshops can be designed to include multiple opportunities for writers to interact through the collaborative generation of writing activities (let's generate three topics for today's writing prompts), feedback sessions (what feedback can we offer the writer on her poem?), and writing technique and skill (query the group about spelling, grammar and proofreading experts. Often volunteers emerge). In the first few weeks, participants negotiate terms of engagement as group guidelines and practices are written, reviewed and revised. These techniques can work to build a sense of investment and community within the workshop itself as well as a growing confidence among individuals as they recognize the value of their contributions (as writers, peer critics and, eventually, workshop co-facilitators). This work is especially important for prison populations, which statistically have much lower rates of educational achievement than the general population and have similarly enjoyed fewer opportunities for demonstrating leadership abilities.

Mentoring and leadership skills can be nurtured particularly well through a system of oral and written peer response. After a writing session guided by facilitators, participants are invited to share and receive commentary on their work. While this may become a space for building a shared sense of community and experience, it can also function as a way for women to offer critical (yet constructive) feedback. Facilitators model such feedback by asking questions, inviting commentary, making comparisons and introducing key concepts from language and writing theory (e.g., use of allusion, metaphor, cultural references). When the workshop moves toward publication, writers participate in a series of revision and design sessions in order to compile their final publication. Certainly security concerns and the practicalities of incarceration prevent civic participation in most areas of carceral life; yet such engagement

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LISTEN TO US,
DAMN IT!
SpeakOut! Journal



SpeakOut! Women's Writing Workshop
Fall 2008

Since the program's inception in 2004, more than 350 writers have participated and 10 issues of the *SpeakOut! Journal* have been published.

— even on the small scale of participating and choosing methods of enforcement in a weekly workshop — can model the benefits and challenges of civic participation that prisoners can experience when transitioning to new communities and expectations post-incarceration.

Valuing Life Experiences and Self-Reflection

Workshops offer space to value women's life experiences as they construct them with their own words and narrative sequences. Though seemingly simple, the opportunity to record a life experience and feel that it is validated can be a powerful step toward improved self-awareness and confidence. In her program evaluation, one writer noted, "I am far more verbally adept and intelligent than I knew I was. My vocabulary was extensive but just unplugged."⁵ Similarly, the act of telling stories can empower women to reclaim and reimagine their self-concept. As one writer noted "My life experiences are a valuable source of inspiration." Writing provides "a sense of pride, 'I did that!'"

As mentioned earlier, many if not most incarcerated women are working to recover from physical, psychological or sexual abuse. These experiences may emerge in workshops and function to let women know — whether or not they speak — that they are not alone. The impact of such acknowledgement is important to recognize. Long-time workshop facilitator at the Cook County Jail, Ann Folwell Stanford argues that writing affords women opportunities to exist both in the moment of their incarceration and the in the future. “The writers share moments with themselves and with each other where they experience ownership of their minds and hearts, where they are nurtured and provide nurture to each other, and where they begin to feel safe enough to share their private, personal and multiple selves.”⁶ The space of the workshop can provide the support women need to validate their pre-incarceration lives and the support for imagining a post-incarceration existence.

The Importance of Publishing

Many prison writing workshops result in a final anthology of writing intended for public dissemination. Some result in simple photocopied booklets with minimal cost and design required; others develop highly polished, full-scale book projects (e.g., Wally Lamb’s site-specific anthology, *Can’t Keep it to Ourselves*, or Judith Scheffler’s collection of historical and contemporary women’s prison writings, *Wall Tappings*). Whatever the form, workshop writers are proud of their written words and artwork, and they often express a desire to make it public. While such publication does not come without risk and should include written permissions and frank discussions about the implications of authorship (such as writing about crime or family members or the protective veil offered by pseudonyms), circulating the words of incarcerated writers, particularly women who may have experienced more silence than voice, is powerful. Writers understand that the process of writing and sharing their work is an important step in the shaping of their future lives, and they are often anxious to send copies of their book to friends, family, victims and the court. Too, the collaborative design of such publications (including artwork, editing, layout, design, etc.) offers opportunities for advancing participants’ literacy skills as they engage in complex revision and problem-solving activities. Finally, publishing offers not only a boost of self-confidence for many writers, but also an opportunity to impact public perceptions about incarcerated people. Publications are often distributed at local libraries, coffee shops and bookstores, where many readers will be new to the genre of prison writing and have had little opportunity to consider the lived experience of incarcerated women beyond the stereotypes perpetuated by reality TV shows and evening news sound bites.

Imagining Futures

In a recent SpeakOut! workshop, one writer lamented her “20-year sentences,” a reference to written lines that went on and on without punctuation or a clear purpose.

Immediately two peers volunteered to help her edit and proofread. Writing workshops can provide incarcerated writers with motivation to improve literacy skills and self-confidence through creative expression and participation in a community of women that moves beyond crime-as-identity. One writer noted, “I learned that my imagination is vivid and I feel so much power and freedom in myself.” Whether coordinated through formal education or volunteer programming, writing workshops offer a needed and desired opportunity for incarcerated women to improve literacy, reflect upon life choices, and imagine meaningful participation in civic life — in and beyond their prison term.

ENDNOTES

¹ Harlow, Caroline. 2003. *Education and correctional populations*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/ecp.pdf.

² Langan, Patrick, and David Levin. 2002. *Recidivism of prisoners released in 1994*. U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics. Available at www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/pub/pdf/rpr94.pdf.

³ Fine, Michelle, et al. 2001. *Changing minds: The impact of college in a maximum-security prison*. Collaborative research by the Graduate Center of the City University of New York and Women in Prison at the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility. Available at <http://web.gc.cuny.edu/che/changingminds.html>.

Steurer, Stephen, Linda Smith and Alice Tracy. 2001. *Three-state recidivism study*. Office of Correctional Education, U.S. Department of Education.

⁴ Legal Services for Prisoners with Children. *Women prisoners: Facts and figures at a glance*. Available at www.prisonerswithchildren.org/pubs/womgen.pdf.

⁵ All excerpts from participants are drawn from a human subjects approved program evaluation administered at the end of each SpeakOut! workshop series.

⁶ Stanford, Ann Folwell. *Where love flies free: Women, home, and writing in Cook County Jail*. Women and Prison: A Site for Resistance. Available at <http://womenandprison.org/social-justice/ann-f-stanford.html>.

Tobi Jacobi, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of English and co-director of the Center for Community Literacy at Colorado State University.