On some days, when Marcia Klotz [1] gets ready to give a lecture, she has to remind herself not to wear jeans, open-toe shoes or anything orange. She also has to remember to lock her cellphone in her car, leave her laptop at home and swap her briefcase for a clear plastic bag. A clear water bottle and a wristwatch are OK, but no Fitbit.

To get to her classroom, Klotz, an assistant professor in the UA Department of English [2] in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences [3], has to pass through a metal detector and four steel doors, and has to sign in with security personnel at various checkpoints. At last, after a guard has handed back her driver's license and issued her a walkie-talkie, she is on her way to teach an English composition class at the Whetstone Unit, a minimum-security facility operated by the Arizona Department of Corrections in Tucson.

Klotz and Colleen Lucey [4], assistant professor in the UA Department of Russian and Slavic Studies [5], part of the College of Humanities [6], have spearheaded an initiative to deliver lectures and seminars at the prison. The people who take their classes, they report, are among the most grateful, dedicated and engaged students they have encountered in their teaching careers.

"These men are hungry for education," says Lucey. "When we ask them what topics they are most interested in, they say 'yes, yes, yes' to everything. Many are asking for courses in the humanities. They want creative writing classes, to write memoirs, poetry, or other forms of creative writing, and they are interested in getting college credit for what they do."

The project has been met with enthusiastic support by the prison's administration. Going forward, Klotz and Lucey hope to bring more instructors aboard and broaden the range of courses.

To that end, they created a lecture series set to begin in February to provide an opportunity for other faculty members to see what teaching behind bars is like without committing to an entire semester. The UA faculty members will deliver lectures on a diverse range of topics, including: how elephants experience trauma, archeological findings on Easter Island, Edgar Allan Poe and Caribbean literature.

"We are open to new lecturers from any field who are willing to commit to a one-hour-and-15-minute lecture," Klotz says. "We encourage them to experience what it's like to be teaching at the prison, with students who are not distracted by cellphones, and who are deeply grateful for the opportunity to learn. It truly is a transformative experience, and we want to give our colleagues an opportunity to share that."

Educational outreach to area prisons has a long history at the UA. In 1970, Richard Shelton [7] ? now Regents’ Professor Emeritus of English ? began teaching writing workshops in...
Arizona's state prisons. Likewise, Erec Toso, an assistant professor in the Department of English, has taught creative writing at the state prison in Tucson and edits the Rain Shadow Review, a literary magazine for prison writers. Thanks to support from the UA Poetry Center, the program has thrived, with many of Shelton's and Toso's students going on to publish the works they created while incarcerated.

Sparked by a gift

The current project, organized by Klotz and Lucey, resulted from a generous donation made to the Department of English by Barbara Martinsons, who teaches sociology and American history in prisons in New York each summer and pioneered prison education in New York City. Her gift was earmarked for prison outreach.

"We put out a call, and a fantastic group of graduate students came forward," Klotz said.

The project started out with 20 incarcerated students and shrunk to about a dozen, due to students being released from prison over the course of the academic year. (Most of the population in the unit where Klotz and Lucey teach are incarcerated for five years or less.)

Lucey first got involved in offering Russian literature courses to inmates while pursuing her doctorate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"In Russia, there has been a long tradition of studying the writing of incarcerated people," she explains. "Many Russian writers and thinkers ? for example, Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Eugenia Ginzburg ? were imprisoned or exiled and wrote about their experiences."

This year, Lucey's students are exploring the topic "Justice and Mercy." At the end of the unit, the men will be tasked with writing an editorial on any topic they're interested in. They also have started a newspaper.

Behind barbed wire, a warm welcome

While teaching at the prison, Klotz and Lucey learned that many of their students had terrible educational experiences in their pasts.

"We prioritize a respectful environment in the classroom, never referring to our students as inmates," Klotz says. "Our goal is to address them as individuals, as men, as learners. Many have not had the educational opportunities in the past to discover how smart they really are."

Some of the men, Klotz says, have "had the cards stacked high against them."

"We hope to help them imagine a number of options for the future, and to get a sense of what it's like to go to college. I feel so honored to teach them."

To learn more about the project, contact Lucey at luceyc@email.arizona.edu or 520-621-3608, or Klotz at mklotz@email.arizona.edu or 520-621-1836.

Source URL: https://uaatwork.arizona.edu/lqp/ua-profs-say-teaching-inmates-has-been-transformative

Links:
[1] https://english.arizona.edu/users/marcia-klotz
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