Breaking in: Educating Prisoners through Environmental Literacy

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Abstract

How can the impact of the environmental movement broaden to underserved communities? Our project involved seeking nontraditional allies in prisons, working with Mt. McGregor Correctional Facility in Wilton, NY to implement an environmental literacy program for inmates. Literature, film, and interactive activities introduced inmates to topics from climate change to green jobs. We used pre- and post-surveys to evaluate the program and made suggestions for future Skidmore/prison collaboration in the field of environmental studies.

1. Introduction

Human adaptation to shifts in the natural world has occurred slowly and sparsely, and the current state of the environment necessitates that a more all-encompassing movement arise to address the unsustainable nature of developed societies. A gap currently exists between scientific research and public understanding, and it is important to bridge that gap for a sustainable future. Few recognize the ways in which society and the environment interact with and impact each other, and, as a result, minimal organized change can occur. Expansion of environmental education efforts, especially into areas that have historically remained out of reach of this type of education, has the potential to grow new movements. Inmates in the United States represent one population excluded from the sphere of environmental education; they remain enclosed in concrete buildings with limited exposure to nature and environmental concepts. By extending environmental education lessons to prisoners, we can reach a portion of society that is currently excluded from the environmental movement (Jones 2008). The interdisciplinary field of environmental education incorporates knowledge, perceptions, and action as its key components, aiming to instill in students an inspiration to pursue positive change (Sobel 2012). In this way, we can begin to connect science, education, and society inside and outside of prisons, building a larger environmental movement by creating a foundation for small movements in nontraditional areas.

1.1 Environmental Education

Environmental education represents an arena of vast potential for opening public perspectives to the interrelatedness of human lives with natural environments. It focuses on the exploitation and degradation of the natural world as critical problems, connecting the needs, interests, and perspectives of a variety of people through environmental conservation (Opotow *et al.*

take responsibility, and say in our own voices: "This is our Earth, too. We are going to be a part of saving it!" (Jones 2008).

Environmental education can begin to address both the exclusivity of previous environmental initiatives and the overarching rejection of environmental sensitivity in modern society, by reaching out to one group of individuals in one institution at a time. of funds is an investment in education programs for prisoners. Improving academic and social skills of inmates has a great potential to mitigate the transition from prison back into society. Hudson Link, which provides higher education in prisons, exemplifies the impact academic programs can have on incarcerated men and women. The association graduates inmates through Mercy College, and boasts a zero percent recidivism rate for graduating

the program to other correctional facilities throughout Washington State. The mission of the SPP is to bring science and sustainabili

Jones noted that "Roots of Success is the missing ingredient in the green collar jobs landscape: an accessible curriculum that helps people break the cycle of poverty by providing needed job and academic skills while empowering them to improve environmental and public health conditions in their communities" (www.rootsofsuccess.org, 2013). The program focuses especially on the literacy level of inmates because they are trying to communicate complex information while fostering a deep understanding and connection to ecological concepts at the same time. To do this, they have a prewritten script, which allows the program to be replicated and engage the prisoners in a more structured way. The script is in the form of a workbook with ten modules representing major environmental themes for the inmates. The program gives a diploma at the end of the course, and it is now being recognized by green industries across the nation and accepted for continuation credits in higher education.

1.4 Scope and Overview of Study

Our aspiration is to help engender environmental sustainability in prisons. We are working with the McGregor Correctional Facility, a medium security prison 15 minutes away from Skidmore, to promote environmental literacy. We aim to bring environmental concepts into the realm of inmates! perception through an environmental literacy program. We want to inspire inmates to return to their communities once out of prison and contribute in ecologically responsible ways, such as volunteering with environmental agencies, pursuing

To initiate working with the prison, we submitted a proposal of our project to the Department of Corrections (DOC) at McGregor and then to the DOC in Albany. The first draft of the proposal was centered on sustainability in prisons, but the idea to build a garden with the inmates at McGregor was rejected by the DOC. We chose to align our project idea more closely with the prison!s mission statement, which is "to improve public safety by providing a continuity of appropriate treatment services in safe and secure facilities where offenders!

of the natural ecosystems in their community. Hence, the novel promotes recognition of human coexistence with nature. Because of the environmental themes i

2.1 Module 1 Methods

The first visit consisted of introducing our project, administering the pre-survey (Appendix A), discussing the inmates! connection to and awareness of the environment (Appendix B), and

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In the last five minutes of the class, we introduced *Hoot* and handed out guiding questions (Appendix D). The inmates were excited to receive reading material, but some commented about it being a children!s book and complained of having homework.

2.2 Module 2 Methods

We started the second class by handing out an information packet. We then moved to an activity called, "The History of the Earth" (Appendix C). Our discussion of *Hoot* followed (Appendix E). Then, we explored urban sprawl and unsustainable development versus "smart growth." After covering these concepts, we broke the class into smaller groups for a thirty-

Module 3 Results

The inmates were extremely attentive throughout the screening of *WALL-E*. We asked them their thoughts on the film as well as their reaction to the opening skyline, how technology has damaged life on earth, and how the conglomerate "Buy N! Large" represents today!s corporations. They indicated that there was nothing green left on the whole planet; waste issues had become the biggest problem; everything had become overwhelmed with trash; and "there was no life at all." The inmates recognized that "Buy N! Large" had

In the final portion of the class, we gave an activity that incorporated a lot of what we had been teaching into a hands-on project where the inmates designed an ideal sustainable city. "Ideal Cities" allowed the inmates to act as city planners in small groups to design a city that would benefit all its inhabitants and provide the best city environment possible. On a chart, each group devised positive and negative aspects of cities they have lived in and improvements that could be made to these cities. On their final draft, the groups mapped out essential features of their sustainable city such as food markets, waste facilities,

that the prisoners can work with when they leave prison, and one inmate expressed concern for being able to get hired as an ex-offender. We pointed out that our information packet included descriptions and contact information of several organizations (in New York and New Jersey) whose missions include working specifically with ex-offenders and helping them find jobs in the green workforce. The inmates!

waste is a source that does not

Question 7. During your time at McGregor, have you become more aware of the conditions in the outdoors (example: change in color of leaves on particular trees, phase of the moon) or less aware? Explain.

A few of the inmates stated that they felt less aware of the outdoors due to the significant amount of time they spend indoors and their limited ability to see other places. Also, in the winter most windows are covered, further reducing inmates feelings of awareness of nature. However, most of the responses said that inmates were more aware of conditions outdoors because of the McGregor facility and its location. For one inmate, it was his first facility without walls and he appreciated the view of the mountains. The inmates had also noticed the weather, the autumn leaves, the color of plant life and the clean air. In the post-survey, there was an even greater response of inmates feeling more aware of the outdoors. One inmate said, "I!m conscious of the change of seasons by grass growth, chipmunks appearing and disappearing, and birdsongs. I!m in tune with the seasons you might say." Only four of the inmates felt less aware of their environment when asked in the post-survey.

Additional Post-Survey Results:

We added four questions onto the post-

movement when they are released. One inmate thought the "educators should have a little more control" and one final respondent felt that more details and more time to build on lessons would have been valuable.

4. Would you take another class in environmental studies? Why or why not? Only one out of the fifteen respondents answered "no" to this question. He evidently interpreted this question as asking whether he would take another class after being released from prison rather than while still in prison, however, and we had hoped to assess interest in taking another course on the environment while in prison (to determine the validity of continuing the program). Some of the most well-developed answers to this question included: "Yes, I want to be a part of the answer and not the problem," "Yes I would, I think it is important that we become aware of how the things we consider to be small cause tremendous damage to our communities and society as a whole," and finally, "Yes, being in prison as long as I have (21 years), I feel a need to know more about the world that I am returning to and the role that I need to play as someone responsible to that world." One inmate answered especially enthusiastically, stating, "Definitely, I!m sure there is more to learn" and included in parentheses "(So when is the advanced class going to start?)".

4. Discussion

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4.1 Answering our Research Questions

The pre- and post-surveys gave us a more tangible way to answer our research questions than relying only on participant observation. We discuss the implications of both research methods for each of the questions below.

Research Question 1: What are the most effective ways to teach prisoners about the environment?

participating inmates because 87% of inmates asserted that they would take another environmental studies class.

We also perceived further benefits. First, because we assigned homework, the inmates made productive use of their time in prison by reading and studying the materials we gave them. Second, the inmates learned that they have a very real role in the larger environmental movement. We will never know whether or not inmates take their new knowledge to support the environment and themselves later in life, but through our program we began to equip them with the tools to do so.

4.2 Limitations and the Transformation of the Modules

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We faced several barriers in attempting to provide a comprehensive environmental literacy program, teaching in prison has severe limitations. Because we were given minimal information about the inmates, we had difficulty developing our curriculum for all four classes. Therefore, the first module was a huge learning curve for us in regards to figuring out what we needed to change for the remaining program. We were also restricted in the type of materials we could bring into the prison. Each time we went to the prison we had to alert the McGregor staff in advance of what we were bringing to the class, and each time they had to approve these materials. Furthermore, the time constraints of two hours each for four class sessions represented the most significant barrier in implementing an effective environmental literacy program in the prison. Unfortunately, we had to rush through activities at times and frequently cut off discussions in order to cover other material. Discussions are integral for learning, so having more time for inmates to thoroughly develop and share their thoughts would have been more productive. As mentioned in the Results

and ask questions to the entire class, so we continued using this in other modules (discussing *Hoot* in Module 2, *WALL-E* in Module 3, and *Green Collar Economy* in Module 4). We also incorporated more activities that separated inmates into small groups to discuss and formulate arguments, solutions, and compromises for various problems. In Module 2, the class divided into four groups representing different stakeholder roles in a contentious development scenario. The inmates surprised us, indulging in this activity and fully taking on their roles. The council members began the meeting in a very formal way, expressing the

4.3 Looking Forward

Reflecting on the entire process of working with Mt. McGregor Correctional Facility, we would change some of the ways that we approached the project. First, when writing our proposal we should have given a more precise description of what we hoped to accomplish. After the prison denied our first proposal, we reached out to Priscilla Frett, a Skidmore student conducting her senior English thesis at McGregor to review the proposal she had written. We read her proposal and made ours more specific (and less ambitious). For the second proposal, we requested four visits, fearing that an overly-eager request would result in a second rejection. In an ideal situation, we would have liked to teach the curriculum over the course of the entire spring semester to mimic an introductory environmental studies class similar to the one we all took at Skidmore College. Since learning is more effective when it is consistent and over a longer period of time, the inmates could have received and processed more material. This would have allowed us to bring in more topics as well as spend more time on each topic, enabling more learning.

As first time teachers we learned a lot about conducting a successful class. On the postsurvey, one inmate said that we needed to gain greater control over the class. Therefore, if

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Appendix A Pre- and Post-survey

How would you describe a green job?

Can you give some examples of this type of work?

Do you consider these types of employment to be accessible to you after you leave

McGregor?

Would you consider pursuing a green job upon release?

How would you obtain information about this sort of job?

Humans are responsible for climate change.

Strongly disagree Disagree Not Sure Agree

Appendix B

Initial Discussion Questions

1. What kind of a connection do you personally have with nature? Have you ever thought about a "connection to nature" before? Based on the restrictions of your current living situation, do you feel you have the ability to be connected to nature at all? *Do you go outside at all, do you notice your surroundings when you do, what do you do outside*

2. Everyone has a different connection to nature but we recognize that in the prison environment, you are more or less deprived of a real connection. In what ways does this impact you? Does it impact you?

Appendix C History of The Earth

"Planet Earth is 4.6 billion years old. If we condense this inconceivable time-span into an understandable concept, we can liken the Earth to a person of 46 years of age. Nothing is known about the first seven years of this person's life, and whilst only scattered information exists about the middle span, we know that only at the age of 42 did the Earth begin to flower. Dinosaurs and the great reptiles did not appear until one year ago, when the planet was 45. Mammals arrived only 8 months ago; in the middle of last week man-like apes evolved into ape-like men, and at the weekend the last ice age enveloped the Earth. Modern Man has been around for four hours. During the last hour, Man discovered agriculture. The industrial revolution began a minute ago. During those 60 seconds of biological time, Modern Man has made a rubbish pit of paradise. He has multiplied his numbers to plague proportions, caused the extinction of 500 species of animals, ransacked the planet for fuels and now stands like a brutish infant, gloating over his meteoric rise to ascendancy..." (Greenpeace Ltd.)

Activity: What point is the passage trying to make? What is your reaction?

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Appendix D Hoot Guiding Questions

Appendix E

Hoot Discussion Questions

How has the story Hoot clarified, confused, or changed your thinking about environmental issues?

From the reading, how would you define "environmental activism?"

Do you agree with the construction company!s actions? Mullet Finger!s? or Roy!s?

Can you think of other ways Roy and Mullet Fingers could have stopped construction of the pancake house, instead of sabotaging Curly!

Appendix F Sustainable Development Role Play

Redwood City!s Planning Department has undertaken the environmental review process for the proposed Saltworks project on the Cargill property located east of Highway 101 and immediately south of Seaport Boulevard. A project application submitted by DMB Associates outlines development plans for the 1,436-acre property.

According to the application, the proposed Saltworks project, billed as "smart-growth," would develop approximately half of the property with housing, retail and commercial uses, with half dedicated for wetlands, parks, a sports field complex, multi-use open space and waterways. The development would provide homes to 30,000 people. The other half of the site would remain undeveloped. Roughly 440 acres would be converted back to tidal wetlands, and another 250 would become parks, baseball fields and soccer fields. The whole project would take 25 years. The additional housing would also create heavy traffic. Since 1901, Cargill

Appendix G NYC Waste Debate

New York is thinking about diverting garbage from out-of-state landfills and using it to generate electricity locally. The plan pits concerns about city spending and carbon emissions against fears of environmental injustice.

In the years since a tugboat nosed the last barge full of garbage into the massive Fresh Kills

Appendix H Ideal Cities

Planners seek to organize a city so that it benefits all its inhabitants. They do things such as build housing, construct infrastructure like roads and plumbing, provide public services like electricity and garbage collection, coordinate commerce, provide recreational facilities such as parks, stadiums and museums, and facilitate transport.

These days, planning is not a simple job suited for one department or group. More and more, the cooperation of a number of government departments, local organizations and private citizens is needed to make a city, even a neighborhood, function healthily. Nevertheless, a coherent vision of what is necessary, what is good and what works is needed if cities are M/TT2 1 Tf [2 ()T2 4 72 518.4cm (s) -\$95 5 518.4cm BT 0.0048 Tc 47 0 0 47 0 0 T

Appendix I **G C a Ec** Discussion Questions

Chapter 1: The Dual Crisis

1) Van Jones stated, "It wasn!t Hurricane Katrina that wrought that catastrophe. It was a perfect storm of a different kind: neglect of our national infrastructure combined with runaway global warming and blatant disregard for the poor." What do you think about this statement? Has anything changed since then? What can we learn from Katrina?

5) Van Jones says, "If the crusade to racially integrate the dirty, gray economy represented the height of nobility in the last century, then how morally compelling is the calling to build an inclusive, green economy in this one?"

6) In what ways do you think we can communicate to people the nobility of the eco-equity movement? Why do you think people