

Teaching Cognitive Skills to Effect Behavioral Change Through a Writing Program

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Abstract

High risk offenders generally lack the cognitive, behavioral, and social skills necessary for success as productive members of society. These skill deficits may undermine the habitual offender's efforts to remain in society, even after periods of incarceration. In order to reduce recidivism, periods of incarceration need to be augmented by programming designed to address these deficits. The pilot program to be described in this paper addresses these deficits through a writing program.

The program, *Writing for Our Lives*, was first piloted in 1994 at the Northeastern Correctional Center, a minimum security facility of the Massachusetts Department of Correction. Based upon a public safety model, with the ultimate goal of reducing recidivism, the writing program is designed to address such goals as shifting offenders' self-identities from procriminal to prosocial, teaching concrete problem solving and consequential thinking skills, enhancing offenders' social perspective-taking skills, and providing links to prosocial community activities.

This paper examines what was accomplished in the program's first year and discusses plans for the future.

Introduction

High risk offenders generally lack the cognitive, behavioral, and social skills necessary for success as productive members of society. These skill deficits may undermine the habitual offender's efforts to remain in society, even after periods of incarceration. In order to reduce recidivism, periods of incarceration need to be augmented by programming designed to address these deficits. The pilot program to be described in this paper addresses these deficits through a writing program.

Background Information

Research demonstrates that characteristics common to effective programs include services that (a) target criminogenic traits, such as antisocial attitudes and values, (b) interrupt the criminal community by immersing offenders in settings where prosocial activities are

prevalent, and (c) serve high risk offenders (Andrews & Bonta, 1994; Gendreau, 1993; Gendreau and Paparozzi, 1995). Offenders perceive reality differently from non-criminals (Bush, 1983), and their egocentric distortions serve to justify their continued criminal behaviors. Empathy, or the ability to understand situations from another's perspective, is deficient in the habitual criminals (Andrews & Bonta, 1994; Ross, Fabiano, & Ross, 1988; Samenow, 1991), but social perspective-taking as a skill can be taught (Goldstein, 1988). The teaching of other critical reasoning skills, such as consequential thinking and concrete problem solving, is also important to the successful rehabilitation of criminals (Alford & Larson, 1987; Gendreau, 1993; Goldstein, 1988; Ross, et al., 1988).

The social alienation of incarcerated individuals can then be lessened through appropriately designed and implemented intervention programs (Rollo, 1995). Candidates for such programs are offenders at high risk for returning to crime, who can be effectively identified using the Level of Supervision Inventory (LSI) as an intake assessment tool (Andrews & Bonta, 1993) or similar instruments. In response to the research findings, the Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC) has instituted an integrated service delivery program to reduce recidivism, for which they designed specific program structures and goals, then contracted with outside service providers to create and implement various program elements. The DOC provides trainings and consultations for service providers, to ensure that all understand the public safety model upon which the programming is based, and share the goal of reducing recidivism through teaching cognitive skills for behavioral change.

Program Goals and Objectives

Writing for Our Lives, a writing program for the correctional setting, was initially developed by this author for use in conjunction with the Correctional Recovery Academy (CRA) program developed by Spectrum Addiction Services for the Massachusetts Department of Correction (DOC). While the writing program may work as a stand-alone program for offenders in general population, and may soon be integrated with community corrections and aftercare programs, the pilot project discussed herein refers only to the curriculum's use within the CRA program.

The programming principles that research has shown to be effective for reducing recidivism are at the core of the Academy program, and provide the foundation for all ancillary services offered in conjunction with the CRA. The CRA program and, subsequently, *Writing for Our Lives* were designed to reduce recidivism by targeting high risk offenders as identified by using validated instruments designed for the Massachusetts DOC with which offenders are evaluated upon admission to the Massachusetts DOC system. Through a posted announcement, high risk offenders are invited to apply voluntarily to the CRA program; those selected for the program at Massachusetts DOC's Northeastern Correc-

Correctional Center (NCC) have had the *Writing for Our Lives* curriculum available to them, as a mandatory piece of their CRA program, since February 1994.

As stipulated by the Massachusetts DOC, *Writing for Our Lives* seeks to accomplish several goals. Through daily journal entries and weekly classroom discussions, the curriculum works to shift the offender's self-identity from procriminal to prosocial. Control of impulses toward antisocial behavior, consequential thinking, and concrete problem solving are addressed using the THINK FIRST method of problem solving (Blinn, 1994) in both class discussion and after-class assignments. Weekly writing assignments, in addition to the daily journal entries, focus on the offender's changing self-identity and reinforce his or her growth as a prosocial member of society. Short stories are used as a basis for discussion of point of view (or empathy), how the characters' peer associations impact upon their lives, the life changes exhibited by the characters, and possible alternative solutions to problems encountered by the characters. Initially the course instructor provides the anti-criminal role model for inmate-students; however, offenders should be modeling prosocial behaviors for one another within the classroom, as well as reporting on them from their journal entries, before course completion. Reading and writing are offered as prosocial leisure time activities, and related activities in the community are presented to provide offenders with the tools to transfer positive leisure time activities acquired in prison to their lives in the community. Lastly, improved attitudes toward authority and reduced hostility are achieved as the offender learns to understand other points of view (through discussion of stories) and to work within the system to solve problems (through group problem-solving exercises using the THINK FIRST method).

Other goals, not stipulated by the Massachusetts DOC but inherent when using writing as the educational vehicle, are achieved with the *Writing for Our Lives* curriculum. Offenders enter the course with a variety of school experiences, ability levels, and literacy skills. By course completion, all inmate-students are hoped to have acquired a self-image of themselves as writers. Further, those with discouraging past academic experiences are hoped to again view themselves as educable within a formal academic setting.

Program Design

The *Writing for Our Lives* curriculum designed to complement the Correctional Recovery Academy (CRA) program is comprised of 90-minute classes that meet once weekly for eight weeks.¹ This pilot program has been under development since late 1993. Although the curriculum was initially designed to be delivered by writers or teachers of writing, recovery counselors or corrections professionals who are aware of the program goals and familiar with the curriculum could be used effectively for service delivery. The instructor focuses on the content of offenders' verbal and written responses to program materials, and emphasis on writing techniques is only given as they apply to the program goals (such as

discussions of point of view, which are used to increase offenders' social perspective-taking skills). For this reason, course instructors familiar with criminogenic behavior patterns and effective programming principles are preferable over educators without corrections experience.

Recording Prosocial Behaviors

During the course, offenders are required to keep daily journals wherein they record at least one prosocial behavior they exhibited that day. Journals are maintained by inmates and only checked for completion, not content, by the instructor. As the course continues, the number of behaviors to be recorded increases, and the offender's attitude accompanying each behavior is added. The principal goal here is to have offenders view themselves as prosocial beings. The daily record-keeping is meant to make offenders aware that they already exhibit behaviors that will aid in their recovery from a criminal lifestyle. Sharing one entry aloud in class each week is meant to help offenders understand what these prosocial behaviors are and how the prosocial attitude behind a behavior serves to strengthen its effectiveness.

Changing Self-Identity from Procriminal to Prosocial

A second major component of the curriculum is the weekly writing assignment. Writing assignments generally require that offenders take stock of their present situations and consider how they may grow as prosocial individuals in the future. Although some assignments may leave room for retrospection, no assignment asks offenders to write about their past life experiences. The purpose is to avoid the blaming characteristic of offenders who view themselves as victims of society or the criminal justice system and to work realistically from the present, having participants reflect in writing how they may succeed as productive members of a prosocial society. An example of this is the "Who Am I?, Who Do I Want to Be, and How Do I Get There from Here?" assignment. A possible exception is a writing assignment entitled "Letter to My Child," which provides inmate-parents with an opportunity to share their family and cultural histories with pride and to focus on those items they feel are important for their offspring to know.² The instructor gives positive written feedback on these weekly assignments, focusing on healthy life choice statements, with the purpose of providing tangible positive reinforcement for prosocial statements.

Concrete Problem Solving & Consequential Thinking

To develop these skills, the original curriculum offered exercises in conflict resolution and values identification. These were based on educational curricula from both the Educators for Social Responsibility³ and the Union of Concerned Scientists.⁴ In the "conflict escalator" exercise, the escalation of conflicts was mapped out visually, and the behaviors and feelings involved at each stage were identified. Exercise adapted from the CHOICES curriculum required that inmates consider their values, then determine which values would determine their

choice of action in various problem situations (Choices, 1989). While both provided a solid foundation upon which to work with the concepts of values and conflict resolution, at that stage the *Writing for Our Lives* curriculum failed to guide offenders through the specific cognitive processes required to examine and resolve problems.

The revised curriculum continues to require consideration of values, but has added the explicit teaching of a step-by-step method of problem solving. THINK FIRST (Blinn, 1994) requires that offenders, given a problem scenario, work through the following model for problem solving (see Figure 1):

- Identify their physical and emotional reactions to the situation,
- Consider whether more information is needed before the problem can be identified
- If so, decide what information is desired and how/where the offender will obtain it.
- Next, offenders are asked to figure out their goals,
- Brainstorm a number of possible solutions,
- Compare each solution with the stated goals,
- Evaluate the possible consequences of each solution,
- Decide which consequences they are willing to take on, and which they wish to avoid, and finally,
- Select a course of action.

Problems are initially addressed by the entire group in class, and those assigned for completion after class (see Figure 2) may be completed by cooperative inmate groups or by individuals, generally at the offender's discretion. The THINK FIRST method generally must be modeled in class a few times and could work well as the basis for a problem-solving course for inmates.⁵

Social Perspective-Taking Skills

Short stories, read between classes, provide the basis for discussions of point of view, which are intended to increase inmates' awareness of social perspectives other than their own. By bringing their own life experiences to the stories and incorporating information the author has provided about the characters, offenders are asked to speculate how a story would change were it narrated by a different character. In these class discussions, inmates are also asked to consider how a character's peer associations impact upon his or her life, how a character's impulse control (or lack thereof) affects the story's outcome, and/or how a character exhibits the ability to think consequentially. Sometimes stories are also used

Figure 1: THINK FIRST

Got a problem?

Take stock of the situation:
(by assessing the items below)

How do you feel?
How do you know how you feel?
Physical signs / symptoms

Identify the problem.
Do you need more information?*

Name facts and opinions.

Know where you stand.

Figure out your goals.
You may have several. list them all.

Identify possible solutions.
Will they help you reach your goals?

Reflect upon consequences.
What might happen?

Select your plan of action.

Think first. Then, act.

*Do you need more information? _____
What do you need to know? _____
How will you find out? _____
Who will you ask? (Who won't you ask?) Why? _____

as the basis for a THINK FIRST exercise because using the stories requires the inmates to assume the role of the character in question and so to hone their social perspective-taking skills.

Links to Prosocial Community Activities

The last component of the *Writing for Our Lives* program is the brief showcasing of a variety of community activities. Course instructors are urged to bring in sample advertisements, fliers, and adult community education course catalogs, and use them to inform inmates about these prosocial leisure time activities that are available in their communities. If offenders are to take advantage of such opportunities upon release, they need to know that such activities exist and where to find them. Information about free or low-cost activities, as well as continuing education programs, should be included.

The Inmates

The target population was initially composed of all inmates entering the Correctional Recovery Academy (CRA) program at Northeastern Correctional Center (NCC) between January 10, 1994, and December, 1994, the first twelve months of the CRA program at this site. NCC is a 274-bed minimum security state prison serving

FIGURE 2: THINK FIRST guide form

THINK FIRST**T**ake stock of the situation:**H**ow do you feel?

Signs & Symptoms

Emotions

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Identify the problem.

Do you need more information? YES NO

What do you need to know?

THINK FIRST guide form Page 2

How will you find out?

Who will you ask? (Who won't you ask?) Why?

Name facts and opinions.

Facts

Opinions

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Know where you stand. _____

THINK FIRST guide form Page 3

Figure out your goals.

What do you want to accomplish? You may have more than one goal.

List them all. Number each goal.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Identify possible solutions.

There may be many ways to resolve the problem.

What solutions can help you meet your goals?

Identify each solution by writing a letter before it.

After each solution, write the number(s) of the goal(s) it could help you achieve.

THINK FIRST guide form Page 4

Reflect upon the consequences of each solution.

What might happen as a result of Solution A? Answer this for every solution listed.

Which of these consequences are you prepared to live with?

Which of these consequences are you not prepared to live with?

Select your plan of action.

Think first. Then act.

men 18 years of age and above. The CRA operating at NCC has 24 beds in a separate housing unit located next to the general population dormitory. For those inmates who voluntarily contracted to enter the CRA at NCC, *Writing for Our Lives* became a mandatory program component.

Of the 72 inmates (six classes) who began *Writing for Our Lives* during 1994, 54 saw the course through to graduation. Since basic literacy skills are necessary for success in the writing program, three inmates were excused from *Writing for Our Lives* following the first class meeting when they demonstrated very limited English language skills and were reported to be functionally illiterate in their first language (Spanish) by Academy staff. Nine inmates unexpectedly left the CRA program prior to course completion, having either resigned from the Academy or been transferred out by the DOC. Four inmates were pulled from *Writing for Our Lives* after two class meetings to fill another program being offered in the same time slot (one of these men continued to keep up with the written assignments and successfully completed the course). One inmate was suspended from the course after missing the third class meeting; he returned to complete the course with the next class group. One inmate was released to the community after completing half the *Writing for Our Lives* course. Finally, one inmate, literate in English but not developmentally ready for the course, was excused after the first class, having been deemed inappropriate for the writing program by both the instructor and Academy staff.

Research Questions

As the program is still in the early stages of implementation, no statistics are yet available with respect to recidivism. Further, no systematic analysis of the features of offenders' writings has been undertaken; however, that most offenders' writings become less guarded as the course progresses is clear.

At the initiation of the pilot program, the research questions addressed the various aspects of the program design.

Recording Prosocial Behaviors

Will offenders record prosocial behaviors on a daily basis? Will they demonstrate increased prosocial behaviors after such self-monitoring?

Changing Self-Identity from Procriminal to Prosocial

Will participation in *Writing for Our Lives* enable offenders to change their self-identities from procriminal to prosocial? Will participation raise their sense of self-efficacy as writers? Will participant's appreciation for the prosocial activity of writing increase?

Concrete Problem Solving & Consequential Thinking

Will offenders master a model for concrete problem solving? Will offenders demonstrate consequential thinking after learning the THINK FIRST method?

Social Perspective-Taking Skills

Will offenders develop social perspective-taking skills

through discussing the point(s) of view from which the assigned short stories are told?

Links to Prosocial Community Activities

Will offenders make use of their knowledge of reading—or writing-related community activities after their release?

Results

While formal systems are not in place to evaluate the results of all the research questions, most notably with respect to offenders' post-release activities, the instructor's informal observations and assessments provide much information. In addition, written evaluations,⁶ filled out by the 54 offenders who completed the course, provide further information.

Recording Prosocial Behaviors

In the classroom setting, it was found that offenders would record prosocial behaviors on a daily basis, once the purpose of the assignment was clear to them. Further, after both this self-monitoring and the experience of reading entries aloud in class and justifying the prosocial nature of each entry, offenders appeared to demonstrate increased prosocial behaviors with regard to this assignment.

The daily prosocial journal entry is an integral part of the *Writing for Our Lives* curriculum. During the pilot study, offenders were found to initially object to the assignment, often by stating that prison is an antisocial environment and that the recording of a prosocial behavior each day would be difficult at best. As well, the concept of journal as a daily log had to be tackled when offenders mistakenly believed that journal entries must log their daily activities that, offenders often claimed, vary little from day to day. The instructor met these arguments by redefining the nature of the prosocial behavior journal entry.

When an offender posed the challenge that prosocial acts cannot occur in antisocial environments, he was told that prosocial acts occur every day in prison, then asked if he had a work assignment. (All CRA participants at NCC work.) Once the offender understood that simply going to his work assignment comprises a prosocial act, he realized that he can easily record the required single prosocial behavior entry each day. I told inmates that for the first week, I would accept just the fact that they went to work (in a paragraph about their work day) as the required entry; however, by the second week, their attitude about the prosocial behavior would also be included, and it had to be prosocial if the entry was to be acceptable. Thus, while going to work with a negative attitude would be accepted the first week, offenders had to identify specific interactions wherein they exhibited prosocial behaviors and about which they had positive attitudes to meet the journal requirement for Week #2. By the end of the course, all inmates did in fact report acceptable entries.

Beginning in the second class meeting, journal entries were shared aloud. Although journals were to be written solely for the writer's eyes, offenders knew they would be

asked to share one entry aloud in class each week. After the entry was read, the offender was asked how the entry constituted a prosocial behavior on his part. To some I was asking the obvious, but others experienced difficulty. Being asked to justify how their entries met the prosocial journal requirement caused inmates to pause and think. When an inmate replied, "I don't know," I would go on and ask another inmate to share, promising to return to the confused offender before we finished. I tried to emphasize with the inmates that the point was not for me to recognize their prosocial behaviors, rather it was for them to recognize their prosocial behaviors. I shared the hope that at the end of eight weeks of writing these entries they would see themselves as prosocial individuals. The wrangling over journal entries sometimes lasted into Week #3, but I found that inmates generally understood the purpose and format of the assignment by that time.

Once the purpose and format of the journal assignment was understood, and offenders had a chance to experience success in defining the prosocial nature of the entries they chose to share in class, inmates generally exhibited increasingly prosocial behaviors—both in complying with the specifics of the assignment and in sharing their entries as models their peers could strive to emulate.

Changing Self-Identity from Procriminal to Prosocial

Informal assessment of the data leads me to believe that participation in *Writing for Our Lives* has enabled offenders to begin (or continue) the process of changing their self-identities from procriminal to prosocial. A significant increase in offenders' sense of self-efficacy as writers, engaging in the prosocial activity of writing, was observed informally and documented by the participating offenders who completed the course. Further, offenders who did not identify themselves as writers at first, have reported that their writing habit, begun in this course, continued well after course completion.

When starting the course with a new batch of inmates, I was frequently asked, "How will creative writing help me in recovery?" Reviewing the course goals and objectives provided in the syllabus may have spoken to the offender with an open mind, who was willing to give this new program a try, but it offered little for the inmate who felt moved to ask that question. To answer that inmate, I stated that for everyone the answer would be different and requested that he answer that question for himself in a few weeks. While the question was often repeated during the second, and sometimes even the third, class session, my answer changed to reflect the offender's experience with the course. Once the daily journal entries, reflecting a prosocial behavior on the offender's part for that day, were mastered, my answers focused on how the journal and writing assignments in *Writing for Our Lives* were meant to help the inmate focus on his own growth in recovery. Usually this question disappeared after the third week, when offenders had completed a couple of the assignments and had learned what sort of

response to expect from the instructor on written assignments.

Since many of the offenders participating in this course had a history of poor school experiences, not to mention varying degrees of writing abilities, I came to believe that many of the challenge questions I fielded on the first night reflected anxiety about their expected performance in an "English class." Upon enrollment in the course, 11 of the original 72 inmates (15%), reported past success with writing classes or identified themselves as writers during the first class session; seven of these men were able to complete *Writing for Our Lives*. Of the 40 course evaluations available at the time of this writing, 82% of respondents stated that they would likely continue keeping their journal for self-reflection and possibly for reinforcement of prosocial behaviors. I believe these responses on the exit evaluations reflected offenders' increased confidence in their writing and in themselves as writers. This was a marked change from the first night of class, when the instructor was frequently confronted by inmates reporting poor experiences in school, learning disabilities, or the general statement, "I hate writing."

The exit evaluation also asks the more general question, "What do you feel you gained over these past eight weeks from this course?" The responses were varied. About 5% were wholly negative. Some offenders commented on insights they had gained, either through study and discussion of characters, writing assignments, or exercises in problem solving. Some wrote about how they had come to look at reading stories differently, in a more favorable light, and gained more from each reading experience. The vast majority commented on their writing experiences and how they now viewed themselves as writers. Given the amount of writing required by the daily journal assignment (at minimum one paragraph for each prosocial behavior), men who viewed themselves as non-writers at the start of the course had changed their views.

Concrete Problem Solving & Consequential Thinking

After participating in this course, many offenders did appear to have mastered a model for concrete problem solving; however, the first three groups of offenders addressed problem solving using models for conflict resolution from other curricula. After learning the THINK FIRST method of problem solving, most offenders demonstrated the ability to think consequentially.

The THINK FIRST (Blinn, 1994) method of problem solving was introduced to the fourth group of offenders, in September, 1994. This sequential model goes beyond identifying emotions and behaviors, requiring offenders to examine the facts and opinions with regard to the problem situation, then to figure out their goals, identify possible solutions, and reflect upon possible consequences before selecting a plan of action.

THINK FIRST was applied to an assortment of problem situations developed in isolation and introduced in the classroom. The complexity of the model meant that a

large portion of class time (at least 30-50 minutes) had to be devoted to problem solving when using THINK FIRST. This deviated from the original course structure, wherein the group was programmed to shift to a new activity every 10 to 20 minutes. As a result, other parts of the course suffered; generally the discussion of the assigned short stories was cut down, if not out of the classes entirely.

While many inmates could participate intelligently in large group problem-solving exercises, involving the entire class and facilitated by the instructor, a number had difficulty remaining focused on the problem situation when asked to work through THINK FIRST independently between classes. Of the 25 inmates who completed the classes featuring THINK FIRST, 88% exhibited an acceptable degree of competency when using the model individually, but 12% demonstrated an inability to work with the model independently of others.

Social Perspective-Taking Skills

Participating offenders exhibited some measure of social perspective-taking skills when discussing the point(s) of view from which the assigned short stories were told; however, this exercise alone could not be credited with furthering the development of such skills in any measurable way. Point of view was addressed as it might have been in any literature or writing class, without a clear link being made by the instructor for the offenders about this purpose of the exercise. In future classes, the curriculum design will take account of the offender's need to have social perspective taking skills explained in conjunction with opportunities for participants to shift to another's perspective when discussing the stories.

Links to Prosocial Community Activities

No system is in place to monitor offenders' post-release activities. Links to a number of activities related to writing, reading, or storytelling were made. The activities ranged from writers' groups held in bookstores or individual homes; through book discussion groups sponsored by libraries, bookstores, or schools; to community-based adult continuing education opportunities and college courses. Although a number of inmates did show interest in the activities presented, the vast majority listened to the brief lectures without comment. This portion of the curriculum best serves those offenders demonstrating an interest in continuing involvement with writing after their release.

Discussion

In the original curriculum, classes focused around recovery issues as they related to the assigned readings. Class themes in the original curriculum included such categories as "changing self-identity," "impulse control," and "pro-social peer association," as they could be discussed in reference to the characters in the assigned stories. Aspects of literature such as plot, character development, and point of view were addressed in rela-

tion to offenders' changing self-identities and their progress in recovery. For example, when discussing impulsive actions (related to antisocial behavior), Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man is Hard to Find," wherein a grandmother's impulsivity lands her entire family in trouble, was used. Point of view, for the development of social perspective-taking skills, was discussed in terms of how a story would change were it to be told from another character's perspective. Such discussions addressed recovery issues without teaching specific skills. In this respect, the original curriculum was too global/general; the curriculum is being revised to better address the specific cognitive needs of the offender population.

A way to overcome some of the above limitations would be to design the curriculum so that each class will focus around specific steps in the problem solving process. By using situations from the stories read as a basis for problem solving, other goals are achieved as well. First, the stories need not be discussed separately from the exercise, as discussion occurs when addressing a particular problem from the story read; this saves class time and serves to streamline the course to meet the 50-minute time blocks most frequently available in the correctional setting. Second, by requiring offenders to address a problem situation from a given character's point of view, practice in taking on other social perspectives is provided.⁷ Writing assignments might then be linked to the specific problem-solving step(s) addressed in the most recent class, thus reinforcing the class lesson and taking the given topic a step further, rather than providing the diversity of activities provided in the original curriculum.

The greatest limitation of the journal entries about specific prosocial behaviors is that entries are made entirely at the discretion of the offender and are checked only for completion, not for content. In an ideal setting, instructors might maintain a dialogue with individual inmates in their journals; however, the cost of such a labor intensive practice could well be prohibitive. The current practice of sharing entries aloud in class provides examples from which the entire group can learn. By engaging the instructor in the initial exchange of ideas when the procedure is new to participants, offenders design examples and elicit responses from which they can learn.

In the first weeks of the course, inmates challenge the instructor about the purpose of the journal assignment. By the last class, some offenders, though compliant with the assignment, have yet to become convinced of the usefulness of the exercise. In contrast, a number of inmates (generally one or two per class group) have reported back to the instructor, weeks or months after the end of the course, that they have continued to make their journal entries. These offenders report that their journals provide them a space in which to work through problematic situations, deal with anger in a prosocial manner, and feel good about their prosocial self-identities. While I like to take these reports at face value, an

alternative interpretation could be that these offenders appreciate the opportunity for individual attention by a female instructor who is not part of the usual corrections staff.

This same interpretation, or a version thereof, might also be extended to explain the continued interest in writing exhibited by men who had initially reported a dislike for the activity. One dedicated young man has developed an essay begun from a *Writing for Our Lives* assignment, submitted multiple drafts to the instructor for review, and reports having sent the piece out to be considered for publication. Two other men, both of whom began with an interest in writing, continue to seek out the instructor for editorial comments on pieces they have written with intent to publish. Regardless of the offenders' motivations, that they continue to pursue the prosocial activity of writing is encouraging.

Plans for the Future

Changes planned for the *Writing for Our Lives* course within the Correctional Recovery Academy (CRA) include broadening the selection of stories to better represent the multiethnic offender population being served. The short story anthologies and literature texts⁸ used during 1994 present a good selection of stories by male, female, African-American, and white non-Hispanic authors. The pieces by Hispanic authors in these collections have not been appropriate for the curriculum, generally because they present more difficult reading. In addition to stories or essays reflecting the Hispanic experience in the United States, relevant pieces by Asian and Native American authors, or reflecting characters from these groups, may also be included. Although the number of culturally relevant readings may be increased, the number of pieces offenders are required to read between each class meeting has decreased since the course was first offered, as the curriculum has become better organized and more focused.

Before the close of Fiscal Year 1995 in Massachusetts, the curriculum will be designed to focus each class meeting on a specific step in the THINK FIRST (Blinn, 1994) problem-solving process. By addressing the problem-solving steps sequentially, rather than attacking the entire process at once, thorough instruction in each step will be provided for all participating offenders. With the wide range of literacy levels and academic abilities represented in each offender group, such focused attention is necessary to benefit all offenders in the group. Once the individual steps have been addressed, and offenders have mastered the skills necessary to complete each piece successfully, the process as a whole will be introduced. With the individual skills mastered, the whole should fit together logically and the transitions between steps should be made more easily.

To be as useful to offenders in general populations as it is for CRA participants, the course should be expanded to sixteen weeks, meeting twice weekly for 50 minute classes. By limiting the number of inmates, keeping enrollment between 10 and 12, the active participation

of each offender in every class can be ensured. By increasing the number of class meetings, additional time could be devoted to in-depth discussions of skills exhibited by characters in stories, possibly with participating offenders assuming character identities and role playing alternate endings to specific situations. The twice weekly meetings would provide offenders one session in which to learn a skill, with a follow-up session wherein writings focusing on the skill would be handed in.

Summary

While the *Writing for Our Lives* curriculum continues to evolve, much progress has been made since the initial course was piloted in February, 1994. By piloting classes with offenders in Massachusetts, the author has gained insight into what works for this population and is working to revise the curriculum to better meet offender needs. Providing classes focused around problem-solving steps will enable the curriculum to more effectively meet its goal of teaching cognitive skills to effect behavioral change in the offender population.

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Without the dedication and enthusiasm of Christopher Mitchell, Assistant Director, Program Services Division, Massachusetts DOC, the *Writing for Our Lives* Course would not exist today. His vision, shared with the author, enabled this program to be developed.

Endnotes

1. When offered to the general population without benefit of the intensive CRA program, the curriculum ought to be spread over a longer period of time. Two 50-minute classes a week for sixteen weeks should accomplish what can be covered once weekly over eight weeks within the CRA.
2. Other assignments have included the following: "How It Feels to Be Prosocial Me," a plot outline of the offender's life to date, followed by a prosocial ending; "How I am Growing in the Correctional Recovery Academy"; and an essay on the value of literature in the offender's life.
3. The "conflict escalator" model was presented at a conference attended by the author, the December 1993 "Children's Literature and Social Responsibility" conference in Cambridge, co-sponsored by Lesley College and the Boston Area Educators for Social Responsibility (BAESR). BAESR, 19 Garden St., Cambridge, MA 02138.

4. Union of Concerned Scientists, 26 Church St., Cambridge, MA 02238.
5. The method has been used quite successfully in another Academy course, ABLE MINDS: Using Literature to Transform Behavior, where problems encountered by the characters in contemporary American novels are used to both teach the THINK FIRST method and to increase inmates' social perspective-taking skills.
6. Course evaluations are completed by inmates during the last class meeting. Evaluation forms are to be completed anonymously.
7. This approach has proven successful in the ABLE MINDS literature course, also designed for the Academy.
8. For short stories and poems, texts used include:

The Bedford Introduction to Literature, second edition, Michael Meyer, ed.

The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction, shorter fourth edition, R.V. Cassill, ed.

The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction, third edition, Ann Charters, ed.

A diverse collection of essays was found in **Making Connection Through Reading and Writing**, edited by Maria Valeri-Gold and Mary P. Deming; however, to date the DOC has been unable to purchase multiple copies of the text through the publishers.

Biographical Sketch

Cynthia Blinn is an educator whose interest in corrections developed while consulting to the Massachusetts Department of Correction. She is pursuing an M.F.A. degree at Emerson College, where this paper grew from a course taught by Dr. Eileen Farrell.

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