

“Art Is Not a Mirror to Reflect Reality, but a Hammer to Shape It”:

How the *Changing Lives through Literature* Program for Juvenile Offenders Uses Young Adult Novels to Guide Troubled Teens

HECTOR: *The best moments in reading are when you come across something—a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things—which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours.*

—from Alan Bennett’s play, *The History Boys*

“Art is not a mirror to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.”

—Bertolt Brecht

“I used to have a conscience, but I killed it.” This troubling statement, proffered by a teenage offender confined to the Juvenile Detention Center (JDC) in a county located in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city, was prompted by a discussion of Paul Volponi’s novel, *Black and White*. At one point in the story, the bus driver Sidney Parker is mugged by two teens—Marcus and Eddie. Parker recalls that up until that point, he had “never been afraid of young people” (109).

In a discussion of that passage with a group of juvenile offenders, the juveniles were asked to consider who had been affected by their crimes. As a probation officer from the county’s Department of Corrections later told me, 90% of the time (by her estimation), when juvenile defendants respond to that question, they don’t mention their victims. This lack of empathy not only explains the quote that begins the previous paragraph, and the actions of the characters Marcus and Eddie, but also highlights the need for a

program that addresses the questionable thought processes that can be the precursor to juvenile crime.

Because of security concerns, the juveniles in detention are not allowed to have pens or pencils, but they are allowed to read books. The library district in the county where the previously mentioned JDC is found shepherds a program, *Changing Lives through Literature* (CLTL), that is designed to immerse the defendants in an intensive reading program centered on young adult (YA) novels, specifically the genre Donelson and Nilsen label “problem novels” (115). In this article I summarize the findings of an IRB-approved study I conducted over the program and suggest ways the findings can impact how YA literature is approached in the language arts classroom.

The theory is that identification with characters in YA literature can serve as a springboard for these juveniles to discuss issues relevant to their own lives and offer a non-threatening environment (CLTL meets at a public library, in contrast to the harsh conditions

found at JDC) for them to critically examine the choices, oftentimes poor choices, made by both the characters in fiction and the juvenile offenders, themselves. The residual payoff may be that this critical inquiry might impact the decision-making processes of the juvenile offenders in real life and help them steer clear of the criminal justice system.

The juveniles, many of whom are under house arrest or have been incarcerated, can be a tough

audience. Oftentimes they have not succeeded in a traditional school environment, and many of them start out the program by proclaiming that they “hate reading.” If the *Changing Lives* program can get through to these hard-to-reach teens, then secondary English teachers may benefit from CLTL’s hard-won insights, for risky behavior, unfortunately, is alarmingly common in the world of adolescents. A recent article on the “teenage brain” begins with these ominous statistics: “In the time it takes you to eat dinner tonight, two adolescents somewhere in the United States will

contract HIV. Over the next month, nearly half of all high-school students will sneak a drink of alcohol. And sometime over the course of 2007, one in 12 high schoolers will try to kill themselves” ([Monastersky A14](#)).

The Problem

I will let you down.

I will make you hurt.

—lyrics to *Hurt*, a song one juvenile offender told me he likes because it is “so real”

CLTL is the brainchild of two people: Robert Waxler, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth (who lost a son to heroin addiction—

Losing Jonathan, Spinner Publications, 2003), and Judge Robert Kane, a Massachusetts District Court justice. Created in 1991, CLTL is an alternative sentencing program (I am focusing on the juvenile program, although it was originally created for adults) that addresses two problems simultaneously. One is our country’s fervent belief in the need to punish. The United States “has a greater rate of incarceration (737 per 100,000 people—or 2.2 million) than any other nation” ([Wallechinsky 5](#)). The statistics suggest that this approach is not achieving its desired effect of making us safer. Consider the parallels to education. According to statistics from the U.S. Department of Education, “more than 3 million students were suspended and another 89,000 were expelled during the 2002-2003 school year,” yet “there is little scientific evidence showing that suspension and expulsion are effective in reducing school violence or increasing school safety” ([Suspension 2](#)).

Bucking this national trend is the recent example of New York State, where Corrections Commissioner Martin Horn pondered New York’s “now-legendary 70 percent drop in homicides” even though they incarcerated far fewer prisoners (qtd. in Powell A2). According to Horn, “What we’ve seen in New York is the fastest drop in crime in the nation, and we did it while locking up a lot less people.” Or as former commissioner Michael Jacobson illuminates the cause/effect relationship, “If you want to drive down crime, the experience of New York shows that it’s ridiculous to spend your first dollar building more prison cells” (qtd. in Powell A2). CLTL believes that, rather than warehousing juvenile offenders, it might make more sense, in some cases, to offer a program that deals with the root causes of juvenile delinquency.

The second problem CLTL speaks to is the steep decline in literary reading in this country, a decline that, according to *Reading at Risk: A Survey of Literary Reading in America*, released by the National Endowment of the Arts in June of 2004, is most pronounced among young adults (xi). CLTL may have insights to offer language arts teachers in terms of convincing teens that literature still matters, that it remains relevant. As Wendell Berry once argued, it may be time we learn *from* literature and not just *about* it. This would be an important step away from what one psychologist suggests is the traditional approach in education: that literature only serves as a “collection

of study-objects largely unrelated to the reader, a kind of language museum of interesting relics” (Gold and Gloade 239).

When a judge feels it will be helpful, he or she can refer a juvenile to a 7-week CLTL session. It then becomes part of the juvenile’s probation requirements. Besides the juvenile offenders, the meeting is attended by a judge, a probation officer, and a facilitator. In the CLTL program I observed, the facilitator was the Youth Outreach Librarian for the county’s public library district, but other programs often use an English teacher. At the first meeting, the group reads a short story out loud together and discusses it; thereafter, a YA novel is assigned to be read prior to each meeting. Following is a typical reading list for a group of male (CLTL sessions are gender-segregated) juvenile offenders:

- **Greasy Lake*, by T. Coraghessan Boyle
- **Black and White*, by Paul Volponi
- **Breathing Underwater*, by Alexandra Flinn
- **The Giver*, by Lois Lowry
- **Whale Talk*, by Chris Crutcher
- **Fallen Angels*, by Walter Dean Myers
- **Hole In My Life*, by Jack Gantos

The Theory

It [poetry] is meant to poke you, get you to buck up, pay attention, rise and shine, look alive, get a grip, get the picture, pull up your socks, wake up and die right.

—Garrison Keillor

Theoretical constructs from a number of fields inform this study. Reader response, where the reader takes an active role and the reading process is seen as a transaction between reader and text, defines the dynamic on which CLTL sessions are grounded. The organizers of CLTL try to model the program after book clubs, where multiple interpretations are encouraged, and all the participants are given a voice.

Other theorists have emphasized the *power* of stories. Joseph Campbell notes that when humans attempt to express the seemingly inexpressible, they turn to stories. Bruno Bettelheim argues that fairy tales play a crucial role in offering guidance and instruction to very young children. Robert Coles, in such works as *The Call of Stories*, describes the therapeutic link between fictional narratives and our lives. Our lives are themselves a text.

Since CLTL appeals to the juveniles’ decision-making processes, critical thinking theorists hold sway here. Self-improvement can be fostered by having the juveniles rethink how they respond to the stimuli in their environment. Bloom’s taxonomy offers a visual representation of the need to move beyond approaches that appeal to mere knowledge acquisition, to higher levels such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Those are the levels where cognitive skills are developed. Kohlberg’s research on moral development finds that the lower stages of value formation are based on self-gratification. The next stage is engaging in behavior because it is regarded as socially acceptable. The highest stage is acting on universal moral principles. The juvenile offenders in CLTL seem to often be stuck in the self-gratification stage, which is why the program’s book discussions often cover the topic of the formation of their beliefs and value systems.

The Findings

“A book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us.”

—Franz Kafka

Perhaps the most obvious question is whether or not the program works. The Corrections people in the county who are skeptical of the program call it “Books for Crooks,” dismissing it as a feel-good time-waster and arguing that if the threat of jail time isn’t going to keep these defendants from committing crimes, what is reading novels going to do? I found that CLTL works for some juveniles, but it is not a cure-all, a finding supported by both anecdotal evidence and quantitative measurements of the recidivism rate. The quantitative evidence from one study of CLTL found a 19% recidivism rate for CLTL graduates versus 45% for a group that did not utilize a comparable reading

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First of all, the juvenile must be ready to make a change. The ones who are ready seem to embrace the program, whereas the ones who have put up a wall are less likely to be impacted. CLTL is very much like education in the sense that “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.” Another similarity to education is the need to be satisfied with small victories. Or as one judge

involved in the program explains, “If you keep one person from hurting somebody else, how valuable is that? Especially if it could be you.”

CLTL offers English teachers many suggestions regarding effective ways to present YA literature in a school setting. The following list presents some possibilities:

1. Model literary discussions after book clubs. Arrange the seating so that all the participants/students can see each other. Give everyone a chance to talk and encourage multiple points of view.
2. If any students are uncomfortable offering personal revelations, allow them to hide behind the characters in fiction and talk about issues in the context of the novel.
3. Creating a safe, non-threatening classroom environment does not preclude challenging the students’ preconceived notions. If the work being discussed makes a provocative point, follow up. If the students are not challenged, the reading material will simply reinforce the views they already hold. Stories can change readers, but only if the readers are prodded to examine their beliefs. Probing questions I heard asked at CLTL meetings in relation to stories they were reading included:
 - What is the difference between respect and fear? Whom do you respect? Who respects you? Do you respect yourself? What qualities earn respect? Do you exhibit the qualities you say you respect in others?

- Who was your favorite character in the book? Why?
- What do the characters in the book want? How do they attempt to get what they want? Are they successful? Why or why not?
- Did this character think before acting? If the character had thought first, would his or her behavior have been different? What were the possible choices? What is the first mistake this character made?
- How does one recognize high-risk situations and avoid them? Would events have turned out differently if this character had not been with these friends? How carefully do you choose your playground and your playmates?
- What is the pay-off for acting this way? What is reinforcing this behavior? What does the future hold for this character if he or she continues to act in this way? How is the character changed as a result of these events?
- Does this character have a conscience? Do you listen to your conscience? Is using alcohol and/or drugs, or being diagnosed with ADHD, or a rough home environment a valid excuse for criminal behavior? How does this character rationalize his or her behavior? At what point should a person be held responsible for doing what is right?
- Do groups take bigger risks than individuals? How important is it to “fit in”? Would classmates/friends see this kind of destructive behavior as “cool”?
- What sort of support system did this character have? Who can you turn to for support?
- Are your parents disappointed in your behavior? What do your parents want for you? How have they been affected by this? How can you make things right by them? If you were a parent and this character were your child, how would you handle him or her? Have you ever talked to your parents about what they were thinking and feeling when they were your age?
- Have any of you been the victim of a crime? How did that make you feel?
- What communities (e.g., sports, school, church, neighborhood) are you a part of? What responsibilities do you have as a member of that community? Do you give back to your community? Are there any communities you have been excluded from?

- Why do societies have rules?
 - What triggers your anger? How do you express your anger?
 - What is the author trying to say?
4. Show the students you're human and not just an authority figure. CLTL participants view judges as less threatening when they see them sitting at the same table in jeans and telling their most embarrassing moment.
 5. Take gender into consideration when compiling reading lists. The male teens' favorite YA novel was the Vietnam story, *Fallen Angels*, by Walter Dean Myers. Consult Smith and Wilhelm's *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*.
 6. Avoid texts that are overly didactic. CLTL also has sessions for adult males, and I observed several of them as a point of comparison. When the adult males were assigned to read John McCain's *Character Is Destiny*, it didn't work because it was too much like a Sunday school lesson. It lacked any subtlety. Recall the lines from Emily Dickinson: "Tell all the truth but tell it slant— / . . . / The Truth must dazzle gradually."
 7. Another word of caution is to work within what Vygotsky calls the "zone of proximal development." When an adult session was assigned to read a collection of sophisticated, modernist poetry, the participants resisted because they didn't understand it. Or as one offender memorably put it, "What in the hell is this guy talking about?"
 8. Utilize any resources your school district offers to students who are struggling readers. There is a strong correlation between literacy difficulties and incarceration.
 9. Make it clear that you care. One juvenile offender I interviewed gave me his evaluation of CLTL: "I just think it's a great program, really. It shows kids that people do care. And it's not just someone's job to care."
 10. Be clear that reading with comprehension does not require some "magic computer chip in the brain" that only English teachers and librarians are born with.
 11. Students will grasp the book club concept if they have regular exposure to it. Here, for example, is a snippet of the discussion when Chris Crutcher's *Whale Talk* was the assigned reading. This was the

fifth meeting and already they flowed easily from talking about the novel, to using the novel to help understand current events, to applying the novel to their own lives. The comments that refer to *Whale Talk* directly are in italics. To keep track of the speakers, I have identified them by their role:

JO-1 = Juvenile offender #1

JO-2 = Juvenile offender #2

F = Facilitator of the meeting

PO = Probation officer

JDG = Judge

JO-1: *You want to make a difference. And I think that's why T.J. [character from the novel] went out and picked the team that he did.*

F: *In that place?*

JO-2: *He wanted to make their lives better.*

JO-1: *With Chris [character from the novel] and the kid with one leg.*

PO: *Kind of had a crusade, didn't he?*

F: *Yeah. And this makes me think so much of the things that are in the news now and have been since Columbine.*

JO-2: *The Amish school. [Eleven Amish school girls had been shot the day before, five of them fatally, in a one-room schoolhouse in the town of Paradise, Pennsylvania.] Why would you shoot an Amish person?*

JO-1: *I saw that on the news. Did you see that on the news?*

PO: *That was an adult.*

JO-1: *I heard the guy took out a grudge from, like, 20 years ago. And, like, tied up girls and shot them in an Amish school.*

JO-2: *He went into a classroom, cleared it out, took the girls, lined them up execution-style, tied them up, and shot them one-by-one. And he didn't care!*

F: *And it's becoming more and more of an issue.*

PO: *There have been three in the last week.*

JO-1: *Shootings?*

PO: *'Cause T.J., in some respects, has got some of the characteristics of the kids who shoot.*

JDG: *He's got a lot of anger issues.*

PO: *He does.*

JO-1: *Another reason he [Chris from the novel] probably chose those kids is, along the lines of, like, down in the future, when the future comes and you're an adult, if you have problems, you could call on one of them.*

PO: *Was he thinking that far ahead?*

JO-1: *I'm saying it's a possibility.*

PO: *It's a bonus to being good to them.*

JO-1: *It is.*

PO: *With his anger, though, he didn't come in and start shooting people.*

F: *Right.*

JO-2: *He vented it.*

JO-1: *I think he vented it through swimming.*

F: [to JO-2] *I was just going to ask, I'll bet you get angry.*

JO-2: *Oh yeah.*

F: *What do you do?*

JO-2: *I take my anger out on this little, like, tae kwan do dummy I have.*

Note the shock expressed by the juvenile offenders at the callous way the shooter in the news had

disregarded his victims. In just a few weeks' time, the juveniles have turned from having to be prodded to consider who was affected by their crimes, to feeling dismay that a perpetrator seemingly "didn't care" that people were hurt by his actions. My sense is that as the *Changing Lives* sessions progressed, the juveniles' moral compasses became more active and were more finely calibrated.

There is one incident that I would offer as the penultimate CLTL story. A CLTL juvenile session was assigned to read the YA novel *Breathing Underwater*, about an abusive relationship. One juvenile showed up late and didn't have the book. When queried, he explained that he recognized his own relationship in the book and gave it to his girlfriend to read. (Their relationship did not survive.) That is an example of "changing lives through literature."

On a final note, English teachers can take the lead in creating CLTL reading programs in their own counties. A perusal of the website at <http://ctl.umassd.edu/home-flash.cfm> is a good starting point.

The shortest distance between truth and a human being is a story.

—Jesuit priest Anthony de Mello

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