

**How Incarcerated Undergraduates Use Higher Education to
Make Sense of Their Lives**

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Abstract

With over 1.5 million adults incarcerated each day in the United States, the development of successful criminal rehabilitation has now become imperative (Public Safety Performance Project, 2010). Higher education has emerged as a potential ‘solution’, with many undergraduate programmes for prisoners boasting lower rates of recidivism than any other rehabilitative programming available. This doctoral research is a mixed methods investigation of Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, an undergraduate degree programme operating at a maximum-security correctional facility in the New York State. While most work in the field of prison education asks whether or not participation reduces recidivism, my research set out to discover how students engage with the processes of education – how they use the tools offered by membership in the social world of the prison college to reframe their understanding of their own experiences, what it means for their identities to be college students in the larger context of the prison, and how education changes their day-to-day lives and their plans for the future.

My understanding is informed primarily by student writing data, generated through the facilitation of autobiographical writing workshops with two groups of men from the programme. Over the course of two ten-week sessions, students in these workshops constructed narratives describing their experiences in education both before and during their prison terms. These narratives define education as experiences of learning – allowing for inclusion of those lessons taught by the family unit and/or “in the street” – rather than just those activities involving school. The workshop process allowed me to build and maintain a significant degree of participant trust, as well as to ask for more clarification and detail as necessary in order to build a rich and thorough understanding of their stories and experiences. This understanding was also supported by six months’ worth of ethnographic and participant observation data, and a quantitative profile of every student Hudson Link has served during its twelve years in operation.

Data analysis using a cultural-historical framework reveals that these students make sense of their lives using tools offered to them by the figured world of the prison college. Reinterpreting past experiences allows them to come to terms with their lives before prison. Identity reconstruction is achieved through guided authoring of personal change narratives, incorporation of education into the sense of self, and discoursal practices of academic English. These constructions of identity are used to reclaim the sense of agency that prison is designed to take away, which in turn influences student and graduate behaviour.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The past pulls down on today.

-Paul

Since 1826, Sing Sing Correctional Facility has overlooked the Hudson River from its position on the edge of a village called Ossining, forty miles north of New York City. Today, about a hundred of the prison's approximately 2,000 inmates are pursuing their Bachelor's degrees from within its walls. Rather than being run and staffed by Sing Sing employees and teachers, the college programme has been facilitated since 1998 by a non-profit organisation called Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison. Mercy College, a liberal arts college based in the nearby town of Dobbs Ferry, New York, accredits these degrees and provides most of the faculty members who teach at the undergraduate level inside the prison.

Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, called simply "Hudson Link" by most, was founded by a group of inmates and outside volunteers in response to 1994 legislation that shut down the majority of programmes offering such degrees in prisons across the country. The religious and academic volunteers who joined forces to respond to the closure at Sing Sing created Hudson Link and served as its initial leadership. Today the organisation's daily operations are managed by a man named Sean Pica, who is the programme's Executive Director as well as one of its first graduates.

In addition to celebrity supporters including millionaire and philanthropist Doris Buffett, entertainer and activist Harry Belafonte, actor Tim Robbins, and actor and rap music star Ice-T, Hudson Link boasts a recidivism rate of zero percent. This means that no Mercy College/Hudson Link graduate has ever been convicted of another crime after his release from prison. The importance of this figure to Hudson Link's organisational mission reflects a growing academic and professional interest in correctional education at the undergraduate level, as statistics from a variety of such programmes have begun to show a dramatic reduction in recidivism rates among their graduates. There has been practitioner and media speculation on the reasons why Hudson Link has 'worked' so well, including a full-length

documentary film titled “Zero Percent” that has been winning awards at film festivals all over the United States. However no rigorous scientific inquiry has yet been conducted with this population. Furthermore, this study aims to move beyond the recidivism question and focus instead on what higher education *means* to the students who undertake it, both during and after their incarceration.

Section 1.1 will present a brief description of the setting and institutional context of the inquiry. This will be followed by a first look at the overarching research question, which asks, *How do prisoners use higher education to make sense of their lives?* Finally Section 1.2 will introduce the structure of the thesis with a brief synopsis of each chapter.

1.1 Research Setting and Institutional Context

Sing Sing Correctional Facility is one of New York’s seventeen maximum-security prisons. Maximum-security is the second-highest security category available (behind only the new supermax¹ prisons), and inmates classified to these facilities tend to be those with long sentences, those believed to have the greatest “likelihood of violence”, and those who pose the greatest risk of escape (Morris, 1995: 239-240). Inmates at Sing Sing live in single-occupancy cells, with a small number of temporary exceptions².

At Sing Sing, as at most maximum-security facilities, general population inmates in good disciplinary standing move throughout the prison during the day. The schedule is made up of three daily “modules”, which may be spent working various jobs around the prison, attending classes, visiting the prison library, meeting with cultural clubs, or going to the yard to exercise or play basketball. Certain modules are designated for haircuts or trips to the prison store. From 8AM to 3PM inmates can visit with outside family and friends in a specially designated area. Sing Sing has a strong recreation programme, with sports leagues

¹ New York State has two correctional facilities, Southport and Upstate, which are disciplinary Segregated Housing Unit (SHU) facilities. The Correctional Association of New York (2003) has argued that “in some jurisdictions, these facilities would be called ‘supermaxes’” due to the conditions, in which inmates are locked in solitary confinement cells 23 hours a day. However the State of New York Department of Corrections (2002, 2006) vehemently denies that any of its facilities meet the criteria for a supermax. For more on supermaxes, cf. Davis, 2001; Toch, 2001.

² Sing Sing has a small number of double bunk reception cells for those newly arrived to the facility, before they receive their permanent housing block assignments. Prisoners accepted and transferred to a special housing unit called “honor block” also bunk two to a cell for their first three months there.

and tournaments, cultural festivals, and evening movie screenings. Many inmates participate in the facility's Youth Assistance Program, which hosts at-risk youth for prison tours and discussion groups. There is an inmate theatre programme, Rehabilitation Through the Arts, led by volunteer actors and drama teachers (cf. Hodara, 2007). In addition to General Equivalency Diploma (GED) and college-level classes, there is also a Master's degree course offered by the New York Theological Seminary, which hosts about twelve students a year³. In this respect, Sing Sing is unusual; most prisons, especially at the maximum-security level, do not have quite so many programme offerings.

To understand the atmosphere of the prison, however, it is important to realise that there is also a good deal of chaos at Sing Sing. In 2009, the facility recorded 300 of what the Department of Corrections terms "unusual incidents", a category which includes events such as assault, discovery of contraband and weapons, employee misconduct, attempted escape, fire, property damage, sexual misconduct, self-injury, and suicide attempts. Of these 300 incidents, 57 were inmate-on-inmate assaults, more than double the New York average for maximum-security facilities. Only one maximum-security prison scored higher in this category (State of New York Department of Correctional Services, 2010b). For me this brings to mind my first day returning to the prison after the 2009 winter holidays. My workshop students said they were supposed to watch a movie in the auditorium on Christmas Day, but instead were all sent back to their cells after one inmate attacked another with a sharp blade, facially disfiguring him, just before the screening. Despite the prison's unusually large range of activities and opportunities, this programming does not neutralise the generally dangerous, often violent atmosphere.

Inside the greater context of this prison is an undergraduate degree programme called Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison. Hudson Link is funded by foundation grants and individual contributions, and the staff is not employed by or affiliated with the prison. Nonetheless the prison's administration supports their daily operations by providing a small

³ Students in the NYTS Master's degree programme come from prisons all over the state and are transferred to Sing Sing upon their admission to the course. NYTS generally allots only about two spaces a year to Hudson Link graduates. For more information see <<http://www.nyts.edu/programs/276-new-york-theological-seminarys-masters-of-professional-studies-program-at-sing-sing-correctional-facility>>

office from which Arlene Mohammed, Hudson Link's Academic Coordinator, orchestrates the majority of the programme's activities. She is responsible for selecting which courses will be offered each semester and then staffing and scheduling them, in addition to managing student registration. Sean Pica, Hudson Link's Executive Director, conducts most of his work externally, visiting the prison a few times a week to accomplish tasks on an as-needed basis. The administrative assistant in the organisation's Ossining office completes the programme's three-person team. No one on Hudson Link's staff or their teaching roster receives payment from the Department of Corrections, and all are registered at Sing Sing as volunteers.

The social world of Hudson Link's prison college programme is a distinctly and deliberately different place than that of the prison at large. The school building where college classes are held actually looks very much like a typical American high school – even the metal detectors. Classes convene in the evenings during the week, though many students spend their afternoon module in the school building as well. There is relative peace and freedom of movement within these classrooms, as the men attend lectures, type their assignments on one of 24 decade-old computers, work together on group projects (one of the only settings in which they are allowed to do so) or sit quietly by themselves and read. There is a visible camaraderie between the students, even if they are no more than acquaintances back on the housing blocks or out in the yard. Still, the possibility of violence is never far away. Watching the way the men choose to stand – backs against the wall, arms crossed in front of them and eyes constantly scanning the area – it is easy to see that no one ever quite lets his guard down.

I understood from the outset that as part of my research I would be spending several hours per week inside one of the most infamous maximum-security prisons in the United States, so of course I expected to feel some amount of tension, maybe even fear. At the same time, all I heard throughout the preparation for my fieldwork was how exceptionally disciplined Hudson Link students were, so it was unclear to me how the environment would affect my work with them. With all this in mind, I set about designing an inquiry that would mitigate the possible negative effects to both participant and researcher, while still giving me access to the information I required.

This information was sought and collected in order to develop a hypothesis around the overarching research question, *How do prisoners use higher education to make sense of their lives?* I wrote this guiding question in order to target the meanings that students made of their own experiences, and the understandings they had come to regarding their present participation in undergraduate education.

1.2 Chapter Summaries

A brief overview of the coming chapters will outline the ways I contextualised this question and built the dataset that would provide the answers.

Chapter 2: Education in Prisons

Chapter 2 presents an overview of the current American correctional system, including its size, scope, and development, in order to contextualise the Hudson Link programme and its students. Information about the demographics, costs, and efficacy of imprisonment in the United States is essential to understanding the field in which rehabilitative programmes like Hudson Link operate, and the reasoning behind their development and continued support. A specific outline of postsecondary correctional education (PSCE) opportunities currently available in the U.S. will cover the historical evolution of undergraduate education in prisons as well as its contemporary manifestations and features. Support for these programmes is based largely on the idea that participation reduces the rate of re-offending after release, so the relationship between education and recidivism will be explored. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the methodological challenges facing researchers who wish to close the gaps in our understanding of the relevant issues, followed by a review of field accounts from teachers and administrators of PSCE.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework of the Study

Despite many attempts to describe and understand PSCE participation in United States prisons, many questions still remain unanswered. Who participates in higher education, and why? What do they hope to achieve and what does their experience mean to

them? What happens to incarcerated students after their release from prison, and what role does their pursuit of education play in those events? Perhaps most salient of all, what can students themselves tell us about what education does for them, and how it does it? Chapter 3 explains the conceptual framework that underpins the design and analysis of this project, as well as the operational research questions that emerged to deepen and focus my understanding.

The central question of the study asks how higher education in prison might help incarcerated men make sense of their lives. Sociocultural theory is presented as the appropriate conceptual framework from which to approach an inquiry where such importance must be placed on context. Drawing on the school of cognitive anthropology and specifically the concept of *figured worlds* (Holland *et al.*, 1998), the theoretical framework of the study focuses on how members of these worlds make sense of their experiences, in the process constructing identities that lend agency by allowing them to plan and direct their behaviour and action. The role of narratives in the development of identity and agency is considered, as well as the role of an envisioned future in every day decision-making. Throughout the chapter I review the theoretical approaches used within research on education, prison, and education in prison in order to justify my conceptual decisions as well as demonstrate my original contribution to knowledge within these fields. The chapter culminates with an introduction of the research questions as they have emerged from the theoretical framework.

Chapter 4: Methodology

Chapter 4 lays out the design, methods, data collection, and data analysis procedures of the thesis. I explain the project's design through a description of the research needs and the corresponding methodological strategies used to meet them. These include: quantitative data collection and analysis, required both for access to the research site and for creating a profile of the programme's structural features; qualitative ethnographic data collected to assist in contextualising and understanding the inquiry's substantive data; and the main source of data – the autobiographical writing workshops conducted with a sample of men from the college programme. The parameters of the writing workshop are explained in depth: design,

participant recruitment, workshop activities – including the six-word memoirs that appear as chapter epigraphs throughout the thesis – and my role in and effects on the context. Chapter 4 then contains a description of the rich feature analysis techniques used to analyse the student writing data, including the integration of observations and field notes. Ethical considerations are presented, covering participant vulnerability, participants’ limited access to civilian women, informed consent, anonymity and confidentiality procedures, and research fatigue. The chapter concludes with a brief section explaining the organisation of the data analysis chapters that follow.

Chapter 5: Making Sense of Life Before College [Findings I]

Chapter 5 examines student writing data that indicate the processes that Hudson Link uses to help its members come to terms with their pasts and move forward. By acquiring specific ways of knowing through both formal (academic) and informal (social) experiences within the figured world of the prison college, students learn to tell a story of their lives that helps them understand, accept, and in some cases re-interpret their experiences. By examining how these students engaged in the narrative process of writing down their stories – the content, the structure, and what they chose to include in the written accounts of their pasts – Chapter 5 explores the resources and opportunities these students use to make sense of their experiences.

The subsections of Chapter 5 deal with the ways students make meaning of their pasts using the tools and opportunities provided by Hudson Link. The writing workshop itself served as a sensemaking opportunity through which students examined the value of education in their families as well as the lessons they learned outside of school, on “the street”. Behavioural science coursework acts as a lens through which students can examine and re-interpret their own and others’ behaviour throughout the events of their lives. Sociology and psychology coursework, as well as social messages about the importance of role models, help students understand the cultural and social circumstances into which they were born and the role of adults in their childhood and adolescence. The writing data also

suggest that some students see prison as something they *had* to go through in order to end up in the more positive place they find themselves now.

Chapter 6: The Tools of Identity Reconstruction [Findings II]

Hudson Link students come from a wide variety of backgrounds and have all had uniquely individual experiences throughout their lives, as evidenced by the writing in Chapter 5. Yet despite that vast spectrum of experience, the data reveal that students use distinctly similar approaches and tools to make choices about who they want to be going forward. In Chapter 6, I show that students undergo an identity reconstruction process facilitated and taught via the figured world of Hudson Link, and demonstrate through textual evidence the specific means by which they do this.

The subsections of this chapter explore the identities that participants in college construct – identities in which they depict themselves as *students* and as *learners* in the face of unacceptable alternatives (gang member, drug user/dealer, time waster, etc.). Their identities are supported by personal change narratives that discard the obsolete, undesirable parts of their histories while incorporating elements of what they perceive to be their lifelong personalities. One such element is the value of being an autodidact, which serves a particular need of incarcerated students and which many of the men believed was a natural ability and a part of their identity from a young age. The chapter also examines the power of language as a tool for identity expression and agency, by looking at students' deliberate use of academic, 'educated' English in the technical construction of their autobiographical writing.

Chapter 7: Approaching the Future [Findings III]

The data presented in Chapter 7 show how Hudson Link students reclaim a sense of agency about the direction of their future through participation in undergraduate work. Some plan to use their college educations to find employment upon their upcoming release, while others want to keep moving in a positive direction despite facing many more years of incarceration. In either case the pursuit of higher education gives students a sense of control over their own situation even though they may have little say over the look and feel of each

day. Though limited in their choices, pursuing an education with the intention to use it in the future is one way of deciding and executing a course of action. This chapter will also explore the manifestations of bootstrapping (a concept introduced and discussed in Chapter 3), as students are seen modifying their environments (continuing to participate in college; imagining a future that includes employment and some context in which they can “give back” – generally to at-risk youth) with the aim of controlling their own behaviour (avoiding future offending and possible return to prison). It will also explore in depth the role of imagined trajectories in students’ ideas about the future, and how where they believe they are headed affects who they believe they are today.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The conclusion chapter of the thesis will synthesise the findings from Chapters 5, 6, and 7 so as to address this study’s original contribution to knowledge in the field of prison education. I reflect on the methodological and theoretical importance of writing within the inquiry. I also suggest and demonstrate that the prison college may be a useful context in which to consider some of the issues relevant higher education more broadly. Future directions for research in the field are offered.

Chapter 2: Education in Prisons

Physically separated from society. Not good.

-Andrew

Formal education has existed in United States prisons since the opening of the first school in 1798 at the Walnut Street Jail in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (Silva, 1994). Today, postsecondary correctional education includes many types of programmes including vocational courses, non-credit-bearing college courses, associate's⁴ degrees, and bachelor's degrees. This educational programming is offered in the context of a sprawling criminal justice system that currently holds more than 1.5 million adults in state and federal prisons – a greater number of people than are incarcerated in the largest 26 European nations combined (Pew Center on the States, 2008; Glaze, 2010; Pew Center on the States, 2010b).

In order to contextualise the efforts of Hudson Link and its students, it is important first to understand the size, scope, and development of the current American correctional system. I will then examine the history and current manifestations of postsecondary correctional education (PSCE), including a discussion of whether or not education 'works', as well as a review of field accounts written by teachers and administrators. Reviewing this literature⁵ will reveal the gaps in our knowledge, as well as the methodological difficulties that make those gaps difficult to close.

2.1 The Development of Modern Carceral Society

Prisons are so embedded in the fabric of modern life that their goals may seem self-evident. In reality, their objectives have shifted over time and this fluctuation is an important

⁴ An Associate's degree (A.S.), roughly equivalent to the U.K.'s foundation degree, certifies that its holder has completed the general education requirements (approximately 2 years' course material) for the Bachelor's of Science (B.S.) degree.

⁵ The literature reviewed for this chapter was, with a few exceptions and unless otherwise noted, limited to programmes serving men. This is in no way intended to downplay the importance of college programmes for women; rather, the unique issues facing incarcerated women deserve a much more thorough review and analysis than there is room for in a study focused on a programme for men. For more on education for incarcerated women see Fine et al., 2001; Fryer, 2006; Severance, 2004; Sharma, 2010; Trounstein, 2004.

factor in understanding what the United States prison system has become. The priorities of the U.S. criminal justice system – a mix of rehabilitation, incapacitation, punishment, and public safety – are shaped at turns by academic and expert testimony, political influence, and public opinion (Hawkins & Alpert, 1989; DiIulio, 1993; Morris & Rothman, 1995: x). As the dominant voice has changed over time, so has the privileged narrative of crime and criminals and with it, the general consensus of what to do about them.

Until the 1970s, the prevailing approach to modern criminal justice was based on the belief that “the solution for crime lay in individualized correctional treatment, the support and supervision of families, and in welfare-enhancing measures of social reform – particularly education and job creation” (Garland, 2001: 15). Treatment was the focus of corrections in the penal welfare state. But in the last 40 years a number of influences have converged, with dramatic effect, on the way that those who break the law are viewed and treated. A paradigm shift from penal welfare to control theory as the chosen approach to corrections aligned with goals that changed from rehabilitation to retribution.

Harsher sentencing including longer terms, mandatory minimums, and “three strikes, you’re out” policies, combined with drastic cuts in programming and services, accompanied a new era of criminal justice in which “incarceration became the punishment of choice, justified in the name of deterrence and retribution without any pretense of rehabilitation” (Gottschalk, 2006: 9). Public opinion carries a great deal more influence than ever before, and research has found that “there is a settled assumption on the part of a large majority of the public in the US and the UK that crime rates are getting worse, whatever the actual patterns” (Garland, 2001: 9). Also relatively new to the discourse of prisons is the emergence of the victim as a significant symbol and voice in criminal justice policy. The debate over what inmates ‘deserve’ is now greatly influenced by the accepted premise that to give something to criminal offenders is to take something away from their victims (Garland, 2001; Gottschalk, 2006).

Following this shift in the country’s approach to criminal justice, the United States prison system now houses a population that numbers over eight times where it stood as recently as 1975 (Jacobson, 2005). A system previously considered “a problematic

institution, necessary as a last resort, but counter-productive and poorly oriented to correctionalist goals” is now, in tandem with unprecedented levels of community supervision (parole and probation), consistently relied upon to protect the public and punish those who threaten its safety (Garland, 2001: 14). However despite hysteria about the incorrigible, depraved nature of criminal offenders, the construction of new prisons has not improved the public’s opinion of its own safety – nor has it been shown to have a meaningful relationship with decreased crime rates (Jacobson, 2005: 51). Observing the growth and progress of the United States prison system over the last four decades brings to mind Maslow’s (1966: 15) famous maxim: “I suppose it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail.”

2.2 The Demographics of Mass Imprisonment

The latest demographic data collected on state and federal prison inmates tell us that the incarcerated population in the United States is astonishing in size. In a recent study, the Pew Center on the States (2008) found that on each day in 2008, one in every hundred adults was incarcerated in an American jail or prison. Adding those on probation or parole, that statistic drops to one in 31 (Pew Center on the States, 2009). The United States Department of Justice reports that as of 2009, the population of American adults under the custody or supervision of parole, probation, prison and jail numbered 7,225,800 (Glaze, 2010). As of January 2010, the population of sentenced prisoners in state custody stood at 1,404,053 men and women – a more than 700 percent increase from just forty years ago – with an additional 208,118 in federal custody (Pew Center on the States, 2010b). New York State alone has 67 state correctional facilities housing 58,000 inmates (State of New York Department of Correctional Services, 2010).

State prisons have recently experienced an exception to the trend of increasing correctional populations. A decline of 4,777 people between December 31st, 2008 and January 1, 2010 was the first decrease in the nationwide state prison population since 1972, accomplished by “diverting low-level offenders and probation and parole violators from prison, strengthening community supervision and re-entry programs, and accelerating the

release of low-risk inmates who complete risk reduction programs” (Pew Center on the States, 2010a). This decline may be partly due to the combination of the recent economic climate and the high costs of incarceration, which will be discussed in Section 2.3. It remains to be seen whether or not this reduction will be ongoing. In any case, despite the population decline in state facilities, the overall rate of incarceration still increased in 2009 due to a growing federal prison population (Pew Center on the States, 2010a).

When differentiated by age and race, demographic statistics show a wildly disproportionate presence of young minorities in the criminal justice system. Looking only at American men between the ages of twenty and 34, the incarceration rate is as high as one in 30. Reduce that to include only black men and the ratio is one in nine (JFA Institute, 2007). One study estimated that as of 2003, a black man aged 30-39 was twice as likely to have gone to prison as to have graduated from college (Western, Schiraldi, & Ziedenberg, 2003). These bleak odds are accompanied by the horrifying information that the population of black men in American prisons and jails now outnumbers black male enrolment in colleges and universities (Gottschalk, 2006; Western, 2007).

While no state or region of the United States is immune to the effects of crime and ensuing imprisonment, statisticians have found that within a given region, the vast majority of jail and prison inmates come from a small pool of neighbourhoods. Using powerful graphical software, the Justice Mapping Center has been able to create telling visual representations of spending within geographic areas, right down to the individual blocks. Figure 1 shows the Justice Mapping Center’s (2006) visual map of corrections spending on residents from the different neighbourhoods of New York City. The three areas circled in white represent the community districts with the highest density of incarcerated residents. The New York Daily News reported that 2003 taxpayer spending for one such area, the stretch of Lexington Avenue between 119th street and 126th street, reached \$3.5 million to incarcerate one in every twenty men from those seven blocks alone (Moore, 2007). Though I did not systematically collect data on the home neighbourhoods of Hudson Link’s students, the autobiographical writing of the men in my sample did reveal that many of them do come from the parts of Harlem, Brooklyn, and the Bronx circled in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Incarceration rate mapped block by block in New York City. Source: Justice Mapping Center.

From a demographic standpoint, Hudson Link students are similar to their peers pursuing education at other correctional institutions in that they are almost all serving long sentences for violent offences. The U.S. Department of Justice (1997) found that inmates serving more than six years – who tend to be those with convictions involving violence – are more likely to participate in correctional education than those serving short sentences for non-violent offences. This trend may be due to the fact that offenders with long sentences simply have more time to wait for spots in these programmes, many of which have waitlists of up to several years.

In previous educational attainment, Hudson Link students, all of whom have a high school diploma or GED and have earned some college or correspondence credit, are unlike the average inmate population. According to a 2004 study by the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 34.4% of those incarcerated in U.S. state prisons had less than a complete high school education (Crayton and Neusteter, 2010); the same could be said for only 19% in the United

States population at large (Greenberg, Dunleavy, & Kutner, 2007). While just over half of the general population has attended some college, only 17% of incarcerated adults have received the same credential (Crayton and Neusteter, 2010; cf. Harlow, 2003). Pettit & Western (2004: 160) also found that the risk of imprisonment is three to four times higher for those who do not finish high school, suggesting a possible relationship between early schooling and subsequent incarceration.

2.3 Costs of Incarceration

The massive inmate population in the United States bears enormous financial implications for the state and federal governments and their supporting taxpayers, who fund the \$74 billion price tag of the country's prison, parole, and probation systems (Glaze, 2010). The Vera Institute of Justice's 2012 *Price of Prisons* report, which surveyed 40 of the 50 states, found an average cost of \$31,360 per inmate, per year. But this average belies the wide range of state expenditures. In New York this figure is as high as \$60,076 per inmate per year, making the taxpayers' cost of prisons \$3.6 billion – almost \$1 billion over the actual budget for the state's Department of Corrections (Henrichson & Delaney, 2012). It is troubling that in attempting to reduce these costs, many states seem to be taking the approach of cutting their per-inmate expenditure in areas such as mental health care, rather containing the prison population using recidivism reduction strategies and lower-cost alternatives to incarceration (ibid.). The enormity of corrections spending is one major reason for the popularity of recidivism research for participants of rehabilitative programming such as prison education programmes, the costs of which are traditionally quite low (Gaes, 2008).

2.4 Recidivism

In addition to the data showing that incarceration is a pervasive and intractable problem in the United States, high rates of post-release return to prison suggest that increased spending on corrections has not been very successful in preventing future incarceration (Fyfe, 1991; Jones & d'Errico, 1994). Over the last two decades, findings indicate that recidivism is high across the country, with one Bureau of Justice Statistics report showing that of those

released in 1994, a national average of 67.5% of convicted offenders had been re-arrested and 51.8% re-incarcerated within three years (Langan & Levin, 2002). The Pew Center on the States recently released follow-up recidivism data showing that within three years, an average of 45.4% of people released in 1999 and 43.3% released in 2004 had been re-incarcerated (Pew Center on the States, 2011). Petersilia (2001: 363) suggests that the high rates of return to prison stem from the fact that the money allocated to corrections is spent on the construction of new prisons rather than on the improvement of programming and services such as education, vocational training, and substance abuse treatment in existing facilities.

A recent report describes recidivism amongst the peers of Hudson Link students. The State of New York Department of Correctional Services found that 41% of the 24,223 inmates released from DOC custody in 2005 returned to prison within three years. This 41% was made up of 30% parole violations and 11% new convictions. Practically speaking, one in three released from custody was sent back to prison on a parole violation⁶, while one in ten went back for a new felony conviction. The majority (43%) of new crimes committed were drug offences, while property offences and violent felony offences followed at a little under a quarter each (23% and 23%, respectively) (State of New York Department of Correctional Services, 2009). The recurring and obstinate problem of recidivism has been one of the main arguments for and influences on education in the criminal justice system since its earliest days.

2.5 History of Correctional Education

The forces that influenced the enormous surge in incarceration also re-shaped educational programming at all levels and continue to impact it today. Throughout its development, correctional education has flourished and dwindled according to the standing of the rehabilitative ideal in the minds of experts, the public, and political elites. The periodic

⁶ An ex-prisoner may violate his or her parole in a variety of ways, from technical infractions like leaving the jurisdiction to something more serious like failing a drug test. The sense in sending someone back to state prison for showing up late to a parole appointment – and whether it makes sense to declare that education ‘didn’t work’ in such a case – warrants its own analysis and is thoroughly addressed by Horn (2001), Petersilia (2001), and Jacobson (2005) among others; nevertheless, New York State counts parole violators in their overall recidivism rate.

pendulum swings of criminal justice priorities – sometimes favouring punishment, other times privileging a discourse of rehabilitation – have fluctuated along with the opportunities available in correctional education (Kerka, 1995; Morris & Rothman, 1995; Garland, 2001; Vacca, 2004; Winterfield *et al.*, 2009).

The first turn towards policies of rehabilitation in the American criminal justice system took place in the late nineteenth century. In 1870, nearly 75 years after corporal punishment, public humiliation, and the gallows had been replaced by incarceration as the punishment of choice, the National Congress of Penitentiary and Reformatory Discipline was held in Cincinnati, Ohio to discuss why crime was still prevalent in American society. The idea of finding ways to reform rather than simply punish convicted criminals began to take hold in the minds of American corrections officials. “The inherited system of isolation, lockstep, and striped uniforms was now perceived as humiliating and deleterious to the reform effort, in effect robbing inmates of their manhood,” writes Rotman (1995: 173; cf. Silva, 1994). Corrections officials began to theorise how inmates might be encouraged to become active participants in changing their behaviour.

Zebulon Brockway, Superintendent of the New York State Reformatory at Elmira, was one of the first prison officials to enact the new rehabilitative ideal based on the concepts of earned freedom and placing an inmate’s future in his own hands⁷. Rather than relying, as did his predecessors, on the use of religious volunteers and prison chaplains to teach inmates how to read the Bible, Brockway hired professional educators to teach at Elmira, growing a programme that eventually offered a variety of courses covering both academic and vocational material (Brockway, 1912; Roberts, 1971; Schlossman & Spillane, 1992; Guerrero, 2011). His work was used as a model for other prisons around the state of New York and the country at large (MacKenzie, 2008: 1).

The first prison college programme on record is the Columbia University initiative, established in fact at Sing Sing in 1923 (Silva, 1994: 22). Correspondence courses and

⁷ Viewed in terms of his historical context, Brockway was progressive in his approach to corrections; for example he believed indeterminate sentencing gave inmates the opportunity to earn their own freedom. However it should be noted that in addition to rewarding prisoners for good behaviour, Brockway used methods of physical punishment so brutal they are difficult to read about (cf. Pisciotta, 1996).

university extension divisions found some success in the years that followed, but by the mid-1960s there were opportunities for higher education at only a handful of state and federal prisons. Postsecondary correctional education became more widely available in 1965, following the passage of the Higher Education Act and the creation of the federal Pell Grant Program. These grants provided tuition subsidies for low-income students across the country, including prisoners who wanted to attend college. College tuition payments became possible for inmates whose cents-per-hour wages had previously held them back. “In 1965,” Rothman (1995: 247) writes, “a major purpose of the prison was thought to be the rehabilitation of the prisoner. By a variety of re-educative programs, the prison was to turn the malefactor into a conforming and productive member of society.” As early as 1977, postsecondary correctional education was available to inmates in nearly two thirds of federal and state facilities in the U.S. (Bell, 1977), though less than 1% of prisoners in these facilities were pursuing and funding an education with the help of the Pell Grant (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

Community colleges hold a long-standing position as the provider of most undergraduate programmes for incarcerated adults (Erisman & Contardo, 2005), perhaps due to the easy compatibility of their characteristics with the demographics traditionally served by community colleges. The typical inmate student, often from a low-income and/or minority background, is not dissimilar from those already availing themselves of the opportunity to pursue local, low-cost undergraduate education at these institutions. Community colleges are also well-established providers of tertiary education to older students, especially those in rural areas and those who may require some remedial work before being fully ready for college-level academics (Erisman & Contardo, 2005; Cohen & Brawer, 2008; Mercer, 2009). Murray (1997) also reports that when Pell Grants were the common funding mechanism of PSCE, the provision of higher education to inmates was a financially solvent endeavour that helped bolster the schools’ overall enrolments. The accrediting institutions benefited greatly from the fact that educating an inmate cost far less than the amount provided by a Pell Grant.

Some schools were reportedly able to use the surplus from federal student funding to subsidise the construction of new campus facilities and buildings (Murray, 1997: 60⁸).

As postsecondary education began thriving in U.S. prisons and jails, Lipton, Martinson, and Wilks (1975) were asked by the New York State Governor's Special Committee on Criminal Offenders to prepare a report on the effectiveness of rehabilitative programming in U.S. prisons. The report looked at 231 studies of rehabilitative programming and concluded that "on the whole nothing works...nothing seemed to have any effect on recidivism" (Lipton, Martinson, & Wilks, 1975: 25). The authors did qualify their findings by saying that the effective administration of certain treatments showed some improvement with certain offender populations, but "nothing works" were the words that stuck (Rothman, 1995; Batiuk *et al.*, 2005; Rose, Reschenberg, & Richards, 2010). As the results of the study gained more momentum, the public – encouraged to a certain extent by political elites looking to capitalise on the electorate's fear – began to lose faith in the possibility of successful offender treatment and the so-called 'experts' whose science now seemed to have led the public's safety astray (Garland, 2001).

A closer look through *The Effectiveness of Correctional Treatment* (1975) reveals that the chapter dealing with educational interventions reviewed only eight studies, none of them evaluations of postsecondary programming. Puzzlingly, some of the studies in question evaluated programming that in reality could barely be classified as education; for example the Jacobson and McGee (1965) study investigated the effectiveness of ten weeks' worth of "daily discussions aimed at developing problem-solving skills" (Martinson, 1974: 26). Despite offering their 231-study sample as proof of the ineffective nature of correctional treatment, the authors did not qualify their conclusion that "educational and vocational programs have not worked" with mention of the small number of educational evaluations included in the sample (1974: 28). Furthermore, they concluded that schooling may be valuable for *some* inmates, depending on "the skill levels the offender brings into the institution, the motivation the individual has to learn, the enthusiasm with which he accepts

⁸ The research participant who shared this information was not willing to reveal his or her institutional affiliation.

the program, and his degree of involvement in it” (1974: 615) as well as “the teacher’s real concern, personal interest, and dynamic instruction” (1974: 363) – criteria which, it seems to me, are required for the effectiveness of any educational programme in any context.

The Effectiveness of Correctional Treatment presented an undeniably harsh critical view of the empirical success of rehabilitative efforts and would resonate through criminal justice reform debates for years to come. But the implications and consequences of its findings belie the fact that Martinson, who himself had been incarcerated in the 1960s, did not advocate a punitive turn in corrections policy. “Martinson thought his work would empty prisons, that the realization that prisons did nothing to end crime would cause a backlash against them and a search for better alternatives...His conclusions, in fact, helped feed a different response, the ‘lock-em-up and throw away the key’ mentality” (Elliott & Aos, 2010). While the authors presented their study as an evaluation of a particular sample of treatment programmes, the results were understood as a critique of the entire potential of rehabilitation. Where they concluded that nothing so far had worked, scholars and politicians used their findings to fuel the argument that nothing ever would. It became clear from Martinson’s later published work (cf. Wilks & Martinson, 1976), as well as his tragic suicide in 1980, that he did not agree with the way the study’s findings had been interpreted.

Whatever Martinson’s personal belief, the 1980s and 1990s saw a sharp decline in the popularity of correctional education, which lost support as well as funding in states across the country. The pendulum was swinging back towards the more punitive theories of what prison should be. In 1994 the Clinton administration passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act, which, among other things, rescinded inmate eligibility for Pell Grant funding⁹. The measure was part of the administration’s get-tough War on Crime agenda, though the financial impact was minimal; at the time, 27,000 prisoners were receiving 0.1% of the \$5.3 billion Pell budget – under \$1,300 per inmate per year (U.S. Department of Education, 1995).

⁹ Pell Grant funding was overturned by amending the Higher Education Act of 1965 to include the clause: “(8) No basic grant shall be awarded under this subpart to any individual who is incarcerated in any Federal or State penal institution” (Section 401(b)(8)).

Explaining the public's attitude towards the government funding of higher education for prisoners, Jacobson (2005: 25) writes:

[In the punitive context of the last decade], substantive arguments about the positive effects of college education have been trumped by political objections against college education that may take the form of "I have to work two jobs to pay for my kid's college education but I have to pay for some convicted felon's education? No way!" This convergence of an overall retributive environment and of many people's own understandable economic insecurities...has created a political atmosphere in which research findings about recidivism rates and prison programs are simply overwhelmed.

In the same vein, another popular argument for the funding restriction was that the grant money awarded to prisoners could be made available to students who had not committed a crime, but this was a red herring. No prisoner ever received a Pell Grant at a traditional campus student's expense, and not a single free world student received a scholarship from the money 'saved' by the change in eligibility requirements. In reality, the Pell programme is non-competitive and its budget is essentially unlimited; the amount spent on these grants depends solely on how many students meet the need requirement in a given academic year (Open Society Institute, 1997; Tyler, Walsch, & Dusenberry, 2006). Free world students, especially those at community colleges, may actually have suffered from the cut when they lost those campus facilities and programmes that were being funded by the Pell Grants awarded to the "invisible students" (Murray, 1997).

When federal funding was rescinded, most higher learning institutions operating in correctional institutions were forced to shut down their efforts. Within a year of its passage, the 1994 crime bill caused so many programmes to withdraw from correctional facilities that prisoner enrolment in college classes dropped from 5% to 2% in prisons nationwide (Ryan & Woodward, 1987; American Correctional Association, 1997). In New York, the loss of federal funding was compounded by Governor Pataki's 1995 legislation making inmates similarly ineligible for state funding from Tuition Assistance Program (TAP) grants. Within just a few years of the cuts all but four of the state's 70 post-secondary correctional education programmes were forced to close (Correctional Association of New York, 2009).

2.6 The Current State of Postsecondary Correctional Education

Despite the ongoing struggle for programme funding and survival in the years since Pell Grant funding was cut, PSCE enrolment levels have rebounded to their pre-1994 status and are now back around 5%. In fact this percentage actually represents many more students today than it did in 1994, due to the growth of the prison population in the last fifteen years. Harlow (2003) reported that as of 2000, 27% of United States correctional facilities were offering college coursework, but researchers from the Institute of Higher Education Policy reported in 2005 that only 3% of all those enrolled in PSCE were in programmes that would earn them a bachelor's or graduate degree (Erisman and Contardo, 2005: 19). The remainder of these provisions is made up of vocational or college-level courses for which participants are not awarded credits of any kind.

These data clearly demonstrate the rarity of what Hudson Link does, as one can only assume that the remaining 97% of students enrolled in PSCE programming are taking non-credit bearing courses or some type of vocational training. The finding also suggests that little of the research conducted on higher education in correctional settings is focused on undergraduate degree programmes like Hudson Link. Instead these studies tend to muddle their results by conflating college degree programmes with Adult Basic Education and General Equivalency Degree curricula and then announcing 'what works' as if their findings apply universally. The immediate need for research focused specifically on programmes leading to four-year degrees will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter.

College programmes still operate mostly through the efforts of community colleges¹⁰. As stated earlier, incarcerated populations bear many economic and geographic similarities to the usual populations served by these schools; inmate students tend to be low-income¹¹, located in rural areas, and older than the average university student – three demographics already served frequently by community colleges (Mercer, 2009). These programmes may be funded by state governments, private charities, religious organisations, and third-party

¹⁰ 68% of the PSCE in the United States is administered by community colleges (Erisman & Contardo 2005).

¹¹ Regardless of an inmate's economic background, inmate wages, which among Hudson Link students hover around an average of 14 cents an hour, necessitate low-cost educational opportunities.

fundraising and facilitating non-profit organisations like Hudson Link. PSCE is also provided and paid for by a handful of private institutions, such as Bard College and Wesleyan University. In some cases students fund individual correspondence courses with help from their families (Roder, 2009). Students may also pay a nominal fee per semester or per year to attend a funded programme; Hudson Link students are responsible for their own tuition, but at \$10 per semester the fees are a mostly symbolic investment.

Educators have tried and continue to refine alternative delivery formats for postsecondary programming, including distance learning and correspondence coursework (Lawrence, 1994b; Garmon, 2002). The next decade may see a slight increase in distance education through technology, though this possibility depends on the development of an Internet connection secure enough for use in prison. Additionally, whether distance education is appropriate or viable for a student population with a considerable need for remedial coursework remains to be seen (Erisman & Contardo, 2005: vi).

2.7 Recidivism and PSCE

Much of the research asking whether correctional education ‘works’ is no doubt fuelled by the idea that participation, especially in postsecondary programming, could result in less money spent to incarcerate re-offenders. Thus, in spite of the difficulties in effectiveness research (discussed in Section 2.8), educational researchers have followed criminologists, sociologists, and psychologists into what Petersilia (2004: 4) called the “cottage industry...of ‘what works?’ articles and books”. These scholars are working to understand the apparent correlation between educational programming, especially postsecondary work, and lowered recidivism rates – and its significance.

There is some debate as to the exact effect size of education on recidivism reduction, but the general consensus seems to be that participation in postsecondary education has a meaningful negative correlation with re-offending after release (Beck & Shipley, 1989; Steurer, Smith, & Tracy, 1991; Palmer, 1992; Taylor, 1992; Adams *et al.*, 1994; Harer, 1994; Lawrence, 1994a; Gerber & Frisvold, 1995; Batiuk, Moke, & Rountree, 1997; Open Society Institute, 1997; Frolander-Ulf & Yates, 2001; Bazos & Hausman, 2004; Chappell, 2004;

Batiuk *et al.*, 2005; Aos, Miller, & Drake, 2006; Coley & Barton, 2006; Gaes, 2008; Winterfield *et al.*, 2009; Urrieta, Martin, & Robinson, 2011). One meta-analysis focusing on research conducted between 1990 and 1999 demonstrated a -.31 (negative) correlation between postsecondary educational participation in PSCE and recidivism (Chappell, 2004). This correlation, while moderate, was shown to be statistically significant. However one should keep in mind, as with any meta-analysis, that studies showing little or no effect of the treatment variable often go unpublished, and thus would not be included in the sample that yielded the -.31 calculation.

Lawrence (1994a), among others, argues that recidivism is too simple a measure for success or failure of correctional education. Should the singular fact that an individual does not commit another crime after release from prison be a more important measure of success than his career, family life, personal happiness, or ultimate contribution to society? It does seem that there should be more vital, meaningful measures to judge the value and effectiveness of correctional education than crime prevention alone. As Lawrence put it, “Recidivism is simply the one measure about which everyone knows to ask” (Lawrence, 1994a).

One study managed to address both the understandable point that “policy makers who fund rehabilitation programs have a legitimate right to expect empirical evidence that such programs reduce crime” (Batiuk, Moke, & Rountree, 1997: 171) and that educational “success” must be approached and considered using more than one binary variable. Duguid & Pawson’s (1998) study, though conducted with a sample of Canadian inmates, bears mention because of its unique methodology, which yielded relevant and meaningful results in their examination of the transformational potential of college education. These researchers used an innovative quantitative methodology in which the actual outcomes of educational participants were compared to their own individual predicted outcomes, rather than to a quasi-experimental control group of non-participants. They did this using the Statistical Information on Recidivism Scale (SIR), which was developed and validated in the early 1980s as a method of predicting which inmates would be successful when released to parole.

Duguid and Pawson's analysis found that for their sample of 654 inmates over a 20-year period, participation in college education significantly reduced the rate of recidivism within three years of release. Most studies stop there, but Duguid and Pawson (1998: 491) write that "To merely conclude that the program worked because of a major reduction in recidivism tells us nothing about why it worked, for whom it worked best, for whom it was less effective, and under what conditions it was most effective". By breaking down their 654-person sample into subgroups, the researchers were able to correlate distinct characteristics, backgrounds, and educational experiences with particularly high rates of post-release success. The most successful subgroups of inmates were those whose grades improved over time¹², those who continued education after release, and those participants from any background who experienced the opportunity to construct new post-release identities based on education and achievement. Their findings about identity are critical, as will be demonstrated in greater detail later in this thesis. The important conclusion for now is that recidivism research can be strengthened considerably through connections to the other important questions that need to be asked about the experience of college in prison.

2.8 Difficulties in PSCE Research

Research into the relationship between education and recidivism is encouraging, but we must view it more critically once we consider the gaps in our knowledge of PSCE in correctional facilities. Tracking the characteristics, experiences, and outcomes of PSCE participants presents the same difficulties that plague correctional research more broadly – obstacles that stem from problems of both collection and standardisation of data. There is a clear lack of detailed information on indicators such as enrolment, duration, curricula, student demographics, state expenditures, and outcomes data for PSCE programmes, especially in the case of those without resulting credentials and certifications.

In some cases, the data needed to gauge programme efficiency are simply not collected. Educational attainment of inmates before their entry to a correctional facility would be useful in judging programme effectiveness, and that attainment, as reported earlier,

¹² As opposed to those with consistently high marks throughout the course of their participation.

has been estimated using a statistical sample. But a statistically generated estimation is the most that researchers can currently achieve on the subject, due to the wide variation between states in the availability of information on inmates' previous educational attainment. Some states collect and record educational attainment information on all entering inmates, while others collect these data only from those participating in an educational programme. Some states collect and report data from private prisons, while others do not. This is not to mention the fact that this information is self-reported and that very few of the states that do collect it have the resources or inclination to confirm reported enrolments¹³.

Another problem with PSCE research is that data on academic postsecondary programmes are usually not collected or distinguished from that of all other programmes that could be considered "postsecondary" – basically anything beyond General Equivalency Diploma courses. "Some administrators may label production-oriented prison industries as 'vocational training'," explain Klein and Tolbert. "Others may classify advanced vocational training as college coursework, if it is offered at the postsecondary level" (Klein & Tolbert, 2004: 286). Even in the event that higher education is being facilitated by a non-profit organisation keeping its own records, these groups rarely have the reach or budget to conduct their own formal analyses of programme effectiveness among their graduates.

Most of all it is the difficulty of tracking individuals after they are released from custody that pervades correctional research in general and that complicates even the most basic inquiry into programme impact. After a prisoner leaves his correctional institution, he may or may not be supervised by a parole officer. Once he is "off paper", either at the time of his release or upon successful completion of his parole conditions, there is no mechanism to keep track of him unless he ends up back in state or federal custody with a new charge. It would be difficult even for individual programmes to track their own students after release, since released offenders parole back to their counties of arrest often without stable addresses or telephone numbers. The obvious measure – whether or not a participant commits another

¹³ In states where GED classes are mandatory for anyone without a high school diploma, someone who didn't want to attend classes might over-report his education. On the other hand, two students in my sample admitted to under-reporting their achievement so as not to place out of the only educational programmes available at their previous facilities.

crime after release – seems to be the simplest, most straightforward way to judge programme efficiency.

However, there are obstacles in the way of clear data collection and reporting even for those who do recidivate: first, a state has no way of knowing if an arrested, convicted, or incarcerated individual has served time in another state on previous charges, making it almost impossible to know for certain who is offending and who is re-offending; second, there is no one nationwide definition of “recidivism”. One state may classify parole violators as recidivists, while others may not count someone unless he is re-incarcerated on new charges (Tolbert, Klein, & Pedroso, 2006). This is to say nothing of those inmates who may still have outstanding warrants for crimes committed previous to their incarceration. For example, if a man served time for a burglary he committed in 1992 and was suspected of an arson that took place just before he was taken into custody later that same year, he may be charged, tried, and convicted of the arson charge *after* completing his sentence for the burglary charge. Most would probably agree that this is not the textbook definition of “re-offending,” yet the best measure we have of recidivism – who shows up back in the system on new charges – does not distinguish between crimes committed before and after those for which time has already been served. It is not surprising, given all these obstacles, that comparing data within and across states is not a simple task.

Despite these challenges, some research suggests that the even more immediate problem may be lack of standardisation in the data we are able to collect or borrow from state agencies. Klein & Tolbert (2004) conducted a study to find the feasibility of using existing state data for the assessment of correctional education programmes and found that the major obstacle in correctional research, more often than not, is not a lack of data. Extensive facility record keeping means that many states do have highly detailed databases of inmate-level demographic information as well as the ability to analyse these data across a variety of indicators. The main problems have to do instead with the lack of standardisation of data and the isolation of the data sets from each other within and across states (Klein & Tolbert, 2004; Mercer, 2009). Without a clearinghouse of corrections data, each of the fifty states and the Federal Bureau of Prisons have different data collection and reporting procedures. For much

of the history of correctional education there has been no recommended protocol for collecting the information most desperately needed. Combined, the lack of standardisation in data collection and reporting both within and across states creates a significant challenge to any sort of large-scale analysis – or even a more limited sample, like the one in this study, examined in context of the correctional population at large.

2.9 Motivations and Support for PSCE

Whatever its cost or impact, we do know that there is a great demand for PSCE among both inmates and administrators of U.S. correctional facilities. The National Assessment of Adult Literacy, which runs a separate analysis of prison inmates, found that as of 2003 more inmates were on waiting lists for vocational education programmes than were actually enrolled (Greenberg, Dunleavy, & Kutner, 2007). Like that of most other postsecondary educational programmes, Hudson Link enrolment is always at capacity, and there is a waitlist for admission of up to several years.

Though inmates clearly want educational programming, we cannot definitively say why. Research on motivations has used both quantitative and qualitative approaches to measuring students' reasons and intentions for pursuing higher education inside. Much of the data reports the same motivations for participation in higher education as in other levels of educational programming in prisons – to pass the time and alleviate boredom, to prepare for release by gaining accreditation and job skills, to please one's family or improve one's institutional record, and maybe to spend some time with civilians (Ayers, 1981; Boshier, 1983; Meussling, 1984; Kiser, 1987; Lawrence, 1994; MacGuinness, 2000; McDowell, 2009).

However, much of this work has been plagued by the same challenges faced in other areas of PSCE research, suffering from a lack of depth and well as breadth. Those studies that attempt to describe and analyse the motivations of prison students from a qualitative standpoint face the unfortunate problem of being seen as anecdotal, informal, or lacking in rigor. The qualitative studies that have been conducted, even the rigorous ones, have been very small-scale, making it difficult to draw real conclusions. On the other hand, quantitative

studies like Boshier's (1983) Prison Education Participation Scale come with a set of preconceived notions of the reasons inmates might pursue higher education and leave little to no room for student input.

Administrations tend to support educational programming because participation often results in safer prisons. Indeed one 1993 study conducted by the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee found that 93% of prison wardens were in favour of educational programming in their facilities (Elikann, 1996). According to the warden of one of the sample prisons in Batchelder & Pippert's (2002) study, "... increasing inmate involvement...would (a) give them some reason to get up in the morning, (b) give structure to their day, (c) create a degree of physical fatigue among the inmates, (d) give them self-esteem, and (e) spread the inmates out more evenly among staff workers" (279). Additionally, there is the potential to ease racial tensions among students who take classes together, which can decrease racially motivated violence on the housing units (Taylor, 1992, 1994; Lawrence, 1994b; Fine *et al.*, 2001).

There has also been some debate in the literature over the effect of educational programming on inmate discipline, which might increase institutional support. It seems reasonable to expect a decrease in disciplinary infractions among inmates with a greater incentive to avoid write-ups, especially in programmes that make clean disciplinary records a pre-requisite both for admission and continued participation. Lahm (2009: 46) found that indeed "...inmates who had participated in college prison courses received significantly fewer tickets in the past year compared to those in the reference group (e.g. GED training)". College was the only type of educational programme shown to have a significantly negative effect (i.e. -.55) on participants' disciplinary infraction rates. It is worth noting, however, that Lahm looked only at students still enrolled in college. Had she included students previously enrolled in the programme who had been removed for disciplinary problems, the negative effect shown may have been lessened or neutralised.

Finally, research paints a clear picture of why state governments and taxpayers might support PSCE. Reducing the money spent to re-incarcerate, along with other possible benefits of postsecondary education like increased income tax revenue, has enormous financial implications for the United States. Savings from recidivism reduction come both

from the reduced cost of incarceration and the return of the correctional population to the national workforce. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2006: 2-4) estimates that should an additional 5% of male high school students in New York graduate and matriculate from college, there would be a \$286,896,473 annual crime-related savings and a \$170,426,743 additional annual earnings, for a total annual benefit of \$457,323,216. These numbers do not reflect the increases that might be seen in child support, victim restitution, and taxes (Pew, 2008). The Alliance's estimates certainly do not seem inflated when one considers that at New York State's 2007 levels, incarcerating twenty men for three years would cost a little over \$2.5 million.

At an average cost upwards of \$31,360 per inmate per year, it stands to reason that shrinking the nation's prison system would free up a lot of taxpayer money, which could then be used for priorities like health care and education (Jacobson, 2005). It is important to be cautious about cost savings analyses, however. I have yet to see, for example, a cost-benefit analysis of the expansion of prison education that takes into account the number of jobs that would be lost should correctional facilities close at the rate that PSCE enthusiasts so vehemently predict that they would. As Fine *et al.* (2001: 34-35) put it, "Prison construction has become a big business in the United States, supporting a number of rural and deindustrialised communities, restoring an economic base, for instance, to a series of towns in Upstate New York. It is often said, in New York that 'Downstate's crime is Upstate's industry'". Prisons throughout the country tend to be located in rural areas and, in many cases, are the best-paying local employers. Considering the abundance of prisons and jails in every state in the nation, it seems to me that the collapse of this system could have a considerable effect on certain local and state economies. Politicians are well aware that closing prisons is unpopular for this very reason; New York Governor Andrew Cuomo defended his recent decision to close several state facilities with the justification that "An incarceration program is not an employment program. If people need jobs, let's get people jobs. Don't put other people in prison to give some people jobs" (Kaplan, 2011; King, 2011).

Total system collapse due to a surge in educational opportunities is unlikely, however. The expansion of educational programming, if it were to take hold, would probably

be incremental and part of broader state-based reform packages. Thoughtful reform could balance corrections spending through the restructuring of sentencing policy, enhanced re-entry initiatives, major changes to parole and probation, and the redistribution of funds from excessive incarceration back to treatment (Jacobson, 2005).

2.10 On-the-ground Accounts of Teaching in Prison

Another source of information on PSCE can be found in the on-the-ground accounts of prison education, which are prevalent in the literature. Though largely anecdotal, many of these studies share common observations about the special joys and challenges of teaching and learning in a prison context. They also provide a unique perspective by speaking to the experiences of the individuals involved in the endeavour of PSCE while it is occurring, not just after it has been completed.

A hallmark of these accounts is the description of the idiosyncrasies of teaching inside – security procedures and the strange environment (Heberle & Rose, 1994; Frolander & Ulf, 2001; Schlosser, 2008). Perhaps not surprisingly, standard prison protocol such as having to remove one's shoes for search upon entry to the facility was unfamiliar to many teachers. Appropriate dress and self-presentation, how much personal information to share with inmate students, and how to develop a sense of trust and community while carrying a panic button were some of the other challenges that came up in these accounts (Meussling, 1984; Kiser, 1987; Heberle & Rose, 1994; Reuss, 2000).

There was also considerable mention of the often strained relationship with staff, who in several on-the-ground accounts had taken it upon themselves to warn incoming teachers that they were dealing with “rapists and murderers”, and that they should expect to be conned (Heberle & Rose, 1994: 98-99). Thomas (1994: 29) wrote that in addition to capricious confiscation of class resources and cancelled course meetings due to lockdowns, he and his students were routinely subjected to what he termed “getting fucked with” – officers attempting to intimidate the instructor and students through class disruptions, subtle threats, and various humiliation rituals. In one such instance, having kept a student a few minutes late after class, Thomas was approached by an officer who “made it clear that while he had no

control over me, he had considerable power over the prisoner, and if my behavior was not to his liking, he would retaliate against him” (ibid.)

Reports of tension between students, instructors, and members of staff go as far back as the late 1780’s, when religious volunteers began delivering lectures and sermons at the Old Stone Prison in Pennsylvania. Warden Reynolds made a strenuous attempt at convincing these men of God that great harm would befall them should they cross the gates into the prison, but the volunteers were undeterred. “In a final, desperate act of intimidation, Reynolds had a cannon placed on the platform next to the clergymen and a guard standing by with a lighted wick, ready to fire into the assembled crowd should the occasion demand (Teeters, 1955). The inmates, of course, displayed only courtesy and appreciation” (Silva, 1994). Some attribute the tension between educators and staff to a sense of injustice about inmates receiving what corrections officers might not be able to afford for themselves or their own children (Murray, 1997: 157). On the whole, corrections officers’ voices, and perhaps a frank discussion of what might make prison education more sympathetic or palatable, are largely missing from the debate.

Mention of the difficulties of delivering effective correctional education, both from an administrative and an operational standpoint, are prevalent in the literature. These challenges can be attributed largely to the disparate priorities of the various parties at work in the care and keeping of inmates (Goldin & Thomas, 1984; Erisman & Contardo, 2005: vi). Security is justifiably a facility administration’s first priority, which can translate to restrictions and impositions on the educational endeavour. One manifestation of administrative priorities taking precedence is the ever-present threat of an inmate student being transferred from one facility to another before he has completed his educational programme. This transfer may be ordered for any number of reasons, including but not limited to security issues, overcrowding, and custody status changes¹⁴. Research indicates that facility-based college programmes can be problematic because of the somewhat frequent transfer of inmates (Kiser,

¹⁴ Custody status indicates an inmate’s security level. Beds at maximum-security facilities are always in greatest demand; as a result, administrations are often forced to move eligible inmates to medium-security facilities, even if it means interrupting their college education, in order to free up the maximum-security bed.

1987; Fine *et al.*, 2001); if an inmate becomes eligible for medium-custody status or has the option to request a transfer to a prison closer to his family, such a move is almost always at the expense of his education.

If by some great stroke of luck a transferred inmate ends up at another facility with a college programme – and given the dearth of higher education opportunities, this is a big “if” – the new programme may not accept transfer credits, and he is likely to be placed at the bottom of a very long waiting list for acceptance. In New York State, a Hudson Link student transferred from Sing Sing to another prison would almost certainly not be able to transfer his credits. The programme most likely to be available at his new facility is the Bard University initiative, which exists at the greatest number of facilities but which does not accept transfer credits from any other programme or college.

Prison security and location also make it difficult to schedule and staff college classes. Prisons are rarely located in convenient geographical proximity to the sponsoring colleges or to any major cities or thoroughfares, making staffing a challenge for most programmes. The most obvious pragmatic solution to this, distance learning through the use of technology-based tools, is extremely difficult to administer because of security concerns with giving inmates access to the Internet (MacKenzie, 2008: 8). Paper-based distance learning courses become more rare as online degree programmes thrive, and those that are available are hard to find and often prohibitively expensive. This is assuming that inmates are ready for college-level work, but that may not be true. Those who have low educational completion and literacy levels would need remedial college preparatory work before being able to handle college-level work, especially without an instructor present. The GED classes offered in many prisons are not sufficient preparation for higher learning, let alone self-directed, self-taught postsecondary education (Harlow, 2003; Erisman & Contardo, 2005: 4).

From the standpoint of daily operations and participation, institutional obstacles make it difficult to get a degree in prison. In their survey responses, many correctional educators told Erisman & Contardo (2005: 21) that completion rates for their programmes were low, “often...due to factors beyond the control of educators, including the fact that in many prison systems inmates must work to earn money to pay for essentials such as shampoo or

toothpaste and may therefore drop out of educational programs that interfere with work assignments”. Kiser (1987: 102) noted difficulties with class scheduling “to be one of the sharpest, most frustrating contrasts between prison teaching and on-campus teaching” – difficulties that were the result of several potential conflicts including that “students were scheduled to be in my class and elsewhere at the same time...during ‘deadlocks’ classes were suspended...guards almost invariably brought the students to class late and took them away early”. Heberle & Rose (1994: 98-99) lament a lack of the reference material students need to conduct independent academic research as well as the largely unhelpful library catalogues “where romance novels challenge more scholarly, if dated, texts for shelf space”. Lack of up-to-date resources is still a prevalent problem in PSCE. Hudson Link students, for example, rely overwhelmingly on encyclopaedia software; though it contains much more information than the library shelves can hold, it is still a static resource.

Despite the immense challenges described above, the accounts produced by teachers of PSCE are overwhelmingly positive. Many teachers have reported that their incarcerated students were consistently more motivated than their on-campus counterparts (Thomas, 1994). One respondent in Murray’s study joked that “Recidivism was high for faculty” (Murray, 1997: 60). In many accounts teachers simply reported enjoyment and satisfaction in working with incarcerated students, which often came as a surprise (Meussling, 1984; Trounstone, 2004). The sentiments of Tootoonchi’s (1993: 34) account are echoed throughout the teaching stories of prison college faculty members:

I had 25 students in my [organizational behaviour] class whom I found to be enthusiastic, eager to learn, hard working, knowledgeable, and very participative in class discussion about organizational, social, and human issues. Their attitudes toward the course and class activities were so positive that, most of the time, I had to remind myself that I was teaching in a prison and that the students were all prisoners...I got to know a group of individuals with tremendous potential to become positive forces in society, but their talents and energies had been used in a wrong direction which led them to where they were now – prison.

Considering the lack of negative accounts in the available literature, one wonders if those publishing about their time teaching inside are only those with positive things to say. No group of teachers in any other area of education in America seems as uniformly positive

about their experiences. Perhaps this can be attributed to the fact that pleasant surprise is such a frequent occurrence for prison teachers, whose preconceived expectations would likely be shaped by a variety of negative assumptions and images of prison inmates.

It is also difficult to say whether positive accounts of PSCE experiences help or hinder the cause of prison education: as Lawrence (1994: 40) points out, the public is most comfortable with the idea of prisoners engaged in hard labour. Any account of enjoyment in the pursuit of knowledge tends to incite the argument that the actions of these offenders should not be rewarded with a college education when many hardworking, law-abiding students cannot afford such a luxury (Lawrence, 1994: 40).

2.11 The Call for Further Research

Despite all that we do know about higher education in prisons, there is a dire need for further research to develop and deepen our understanding of the experience. Based on the difficulties of using state correctional data, a working group¹⁵ of administrators, educators, and researchers created the Correctional Education Data Guidebook as an instrument designed to standardise data collection and distribution between states (Tolbert, Klein, & Pedroso, 2006). This Guidebook aims to introduce a common language to all state systems so that data could be more easily collated and compared for the purposes of policymaking and effective correctional administration. Figure 2 lists the questions defining the major policy issues as outlined by the Guidebook. Their model prioritises a lot of the basic data that certainly do need collection and standardisation, but still omits those questions that would deepen our understanding and knowledge about the human experience of higher education in prison.

¹⁵ This working group was made up of members from ten U.S. state departments of corrections, one state department of education, one state school district, the U.S. Department of Education, and the U.S. Department of Justice.

- Who is incarcerated?
- What are the educational needs of inmates?
- Who participates in correctional education?
- What are the education and employment outcomes of correctional education participation?
- What correctional education services do facilities offer?
- How are correctional education programs staffed?
- What are the costs of providing correctional education?

Figure 2: Questions to inform major policy issues. Source: Correctional Education Data Guidebook, page 7

The basic nature of these questions reiterates the fact that in many cases, even the simplest parts of correctional education are yet to be fully understood. However, researchers are hopeful at the possibilities for analyses that draw on large, comprehensive state databases outside corrections as well as strategic sampling methods (Klein & Tolbert, 2004, 2007). By using the collection and coding strategies suggested by the Guidebook – and several states already do – the quantitative end of the remaining questions about correctional education may soon see improvement.

A related debate surrounds what types of education are best for inmates. “Current trends are away from traditional college courses held in prison, and moving toward an education component specifically designed for prisoners. Since traditional college includes problem-solving and critical thinking skills, a more global worldview, and an understanding of society,” Chappell (2004) asks, “are programs that focus on literacy, mathematics, occupational factors, good behaviors, attitudes, and discipline, only (for example), enough to enable an inmate to make qualitative changes and achieve legitimate success in life?” This question remains unanswered but will be explored throughout this thesis. Gaes (2008: 2) also points out that research has not yet addressed whether participation in education while incarcerated incites long-term interest in post-prison education, or enhances one’s investment in “prosocial institutions...prosocial attitudes, or enhanced moral reasoning” insofar as they might be a side benefit of prison education. It seems there are some questions that may need to be addressed with depth rather than with breadth.

Beyond the basics, there is a great call to enhance our understanding about prison education with data provided by students themselves. For almost thirty years, researchers have called for more work into the motivations and experiences of students in PSCE programming (Boshier, 1983; Parsons & Langenbach, 1993; MacGuinness, 2000; Reuss, 2000; Rose, 2004). As MacGuinness (2000: 89) wrote, “The strongest contribution to the discussion of factors influencing participation in prison education must ultimately come from inmates themselves. Only they will be able to relate their experience of imprisonment and the effects this had on them but little is known about the reasons prisoners give themselves for participating in educational programmes”. Here she touches on an idea – the reasons prisoners give *to themselves* – that will be an important component of the present thesis and discussed more extensively in the chapters that follow.

Research also suggests that the success from educational programming and participation may be credited to something beyond the coursework and resulting certifications, but further work is still needed to understand this fully. Fine *et al.*'s (2001) investigation of the women participating in college at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility demonstrated that incarcerated women taking college courses gained the opportunity to reflect on past events, challenge long-term negative self-images, and gain a sense of responsibility and control over present actions and future outcomes. “Women see themselves and society critically and reflexively,” she wrote of the experience. “College enables students to move from seeing themselves as passive objects into seeing themselves as active subjects” (25). This “new found sense of personal agency and social responsibility” (24) was also found to extend beyond the limits of each individual to create an educational community within the prison context.

Fine *et al.* (2001: 25) also observed the ways in which participation in college counteracted the hopeless attitudes nurtured by years of poverty, racial discrimination, abuse, unstable childhoods and lack of educational opportunities allowing women to see “that they do have options, can make choices and can embark on actions to alter the course of their lives and participate in social change projects”. The ideas explored in the Fine *et al.* study begin to address the questions that are left unanswered by the broader-scale statistical analyses of

higher education in prison and demand further exploration. The concept of agency and how it affects both behaviour and outcomes will play an important role in the present inquiry and will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Despite a handful of depth studies like Fine *et al.*'s (2001), many sources agree with MacKenzie's (2008: ii) sentiment that "Research on education programs fails to untangle the issues of what works for whom, when, why and in what circumstances". Even the major, large-budget organisations that have launched inquiries into prison education have run up against difficulties in obtaining information (Chappell, 2004; Erisman & Contardo, 2005). This study aims to inform our understanding of correctional education not with breadth, but with depth. By looking at the role of agency in behaviour, it aims to fill in some of both the how and the why by investigating the actual processes of education, and how students engage with them.

2.12 Closing Remarks

Despite many attempts to describe and understand PSCE participation in United States prisons, many questions still remain unanswered. Who participates in higher education, and why? What do they hope to achieve and what does their experience mean to them? What happens to incarcerated students after their release from prison, and what role does their pursuit of education play in these events? Perhaps most important of all, what can students themselves tell us about what education does for them, and how it does it? These questions require a theoretical framework that creates a working conceptualisation of experience, identity, narrative, and agency. The next chapter explains the research questions that emerged as my theoretical understanding deepened, as well as the conceptual framework I built to help me think about and find answers to those questions.

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework of the Study

I'm a philosopher, certain about uncertainty.

-Noah

Perhaps it goes without saying that in the study of prison education, context matters. Not only is the prison setting unique in its norms and customs, but the activity of pursuing higher education within that environment is in itself a rarity: at Sing Sing only about a hundred of the institution's two thousand inmates are enrolled at any one time. Understanding the relationships of students to the setting – both the specific learning environment (the prison classroom) and the greater context in which that learning is set and with which it interacts (the housing blocks, hallways, cafeteria, concrete “yards”, and the barbed wire and guard towers that hold it all together) – is essential in order to understand how that learning engages them and how they engage with it.

My research asks how higher education helps men in prison make sense of their lives. In this chapter I will introduce the conceptual framework that underpins the design and analysis of this project and the operational research questions that guided my understanding. With such an emphasis placed on context, the sociocultural school of cognitive anthropology was a key influence on my research. As an investigation of human learning and development amidst this context, the study draws on social and critical psychology to see how participants internalise their worlds as well as act them out in concert with others. The second half of the chapter deals with the specific processes and outcomes of identity reconstruction of which I found evidence in my data. An ongoing review of the theoretical approaches within the research literature on education, prison, and education in prison will situate this work by showing precedence for my conceptual framework, as well as demonstrating the original contribution that my investigation makes to these fields.

3.1 Sociocultural theory: Learning in context

Wertsch, Rio, & Alvarez (1995: 11) explained that sociocultural research is used in order to “explicate the relationship between human action, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which it occurs, on the other.” Building primarily on the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1961, 1978, 1981, 1986, 2004), sociocultural theory can be used to study human action within a specific context: how the meanings of human actions are created and understood, and how cultural tools such as language may be developed within and then brought to bear upon that context. Within educational research, a sociocultural framework can effectively guide investigation of the relationship between individual learners and the social and pedagogical contexts in which their learning takes place.

One of the key concepts in Vygotsky’s work was the development of higher mental functions, which allow human beings to overcome the direct and immediate stimuli in their environment in order to plan and execute desired outcomes. Through the act of assigning meaning to certain designated symbols, be they particular behaviours or tangible material objects, we are able to exert control over our mental functions. As examples of these symbols, or “tools”, Vygotsky listed “language; various systems for counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes; diagrams; maps; and mechanical drawings” (1981: 137) – a thorough but by no means exhaustive list. The use of these tools might take place through “explicit mediation”, in which a teacher deliberately guides their use, or “implicit mediation”, negotiating meaning and communication in a process that may not be overtly recognisable to the casual observer (Wertsch, 2007: 180). This semiotic mediation, including the symbols we create as well as the particular meanings they are assigned, depends on the culture in which we undertake it.

Echoing the importance Vygotsky placed on the contexts of learning, Bruner (1991: 20) wrote about the implications of sociocultural theory for the study of education. He explained:

...there are specific domains of human knowledge and skill and...they are supported and organized by cultural tool kits. If we accept this view, a first conclusion would be

that in understanding the nature and growth of mind in any setting, we cannot take as our unit of analysis the isolated individual operating ‘inside his or her own skin’ in a cultural vacuum. Rather, we must accept the view that the human mind cannot express its nascent powers without the enablement of the symbolic systems of culture.

In studying the knowledge and reasoning of individuals operating within larger social and cultural contexts, Bruner suggested, we must expand our awareness to the semiotic influences that “mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality” (1991: 3). The sociocultural setting – the specific domain of human knowledge and action – in which individuals align themselves is an important source of information if we want to understand the meanings of those individuals’ actions.

Dewey (1916: 26) indicated that in fact all such social environments, even those that don’t resemble traditional schooling, have the potential to educate. Of the multiple social contexts in which learning and mediated action take hold, Dewey (1916: 24-25) wrote:

...a modern society is many societies more or less loosely connected...Each such group exercises a formative influence on the active dispositions of its members. A clique, a club, a gang, a Fagin’s household of thieves, the prisoners in a jail, provide educative environments for those who enter into their collective or conjoint activities, as truly as a church, a labor union, a business partnership, or a political party. Each of them is a mode of associated or community life, quite as much as is a family, a town, or a state...they have aims in common, and the activity of each member is directly modified by knowledge of what others are doing.

This passage certainly speaks to the possibility of the prison college as one of the “societies” in which learning through joint action can take place. Yet Dewey also goes so far as to assert that the prison itself will be an educative environment regardless of the participation of the incarcerated in academic activities. People learn to exist and operate within their social worlds, whether or not this occurs in a formal school context.

Accepting the sociocultural premise that setting is inextricably linked to tool use in the execution of deliberate action, I looked for a more specific way to conceptualise and understand Hudson Link as a pedagogical environment. The study of context has been approached in a variety of ways within the field of cognitive anthropology. Tracing its roots to the late 1950s, this paradigm examines human thought and meaning within the contexts and understandings of social groups (D’Andrade, 1995). Early cognitive anthropologists

aimed to improve upon traditional ethnography in which, they believed, the ethnographer inevitably imposed his own value system on the analysis. Instead they argued for understanding situated human action from the cultural and knowledge standpoint of the actors, leaving the researcher to “strive to define objects according to the conceptual system of the people he is studying” (Frake, 1969: 28; c.f. Frake, 1962). Within a subfield of cultural anthropology, cognitive anthropologists were interested in maintaining the importance of cultural context in a way that counteracted the hegemonic approaches then standard in the field of cognitive psychology.

Cognitive anthropologists have conducted studies on a diverse range of topics, from the early focus on indigenous populations (Conklin, 1955; Goodenough, 1956; Lounsbury, 1956; Romney & D’Andrade, 1964; Frake, 1969) to the later work on situated learning within communities of practice, including the study of connections between group activities and the resultant identities of their members (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Goodenough, 1994). However it was the work of Holland *et al.* (1998), paying special attention to “the articulation of activities within larger systems of power and privilege”, that seemed particularly relevant to the investigation of a context like the prison. As it engages both the cultural and the individual aspects of experience, Holland *et al.*’s construct of the *figured world* became most useful for this particular investigation.

3.1.1 Figured worlds

Holland *et al.* (1998: 52) defined the *figured world* as “a socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognized, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued over others”. They specify that as social and cultural constructions, figured worlds are not necessarily bound by physical space and time but rather defined by the activities undertaken by the members who create and sustain them. While these spaces of meaning are maintained in part as images in the minds of its members, it is concrete action – “re-creating them by work with others” (1998: 41) – that perpetuates their existence. Holland *et al.*’s (1998) framework has been extremely influential in educational research, applied to a wide variety of inquiries into the

sociocultural construction of identity in educational contexts (Tonso, 2006; Kasworm, 2005, 2010; Hatt, 2007; Rubin, 2007; Urrieta, 2007a, 2007b; Rush & Fecho, 2008; Worthman, 2008; Moje *et al.*, 2009; Naraian, 2010; Solomon, Craft, & Lawson, 2010; Ma & Singer-Gabella, 2011; Urrieta, Martin, & Robinson, 2011; Vågan, 2011).

One example through which Holland *et al.* (1998) develop the concept of the figured world is Alcoholics Anonymous. Using work originally carried out by Cain (1991), the authors show that it is not members' isolated ideas of A.A. or the physical place in which meetings are held that define the space of recovery. Rather, it is applying the A.A. programme that allows the figured world to continue to exist and its members, in carrying out those actions, to sustain their membership within it. In order to maintain identities of non-drinking alcoholics, members must hold the idea of A.A. and its cultural values in their minds between meetings. But this world of recovery would cease to exist without the physical real-time activities of the group (1998: 66-97; cf. Cain, 1991).

The concrete activities of the prison college are carried out in specific places and times, but these actions are not performed in physical spaces dedicated solely to the activity of teaching and learning. When Hudson Link students go back to their housing units, their classrooms are used for a variety of unrelated purposes, including the activities of other figured worlds such as rehearsals for the facility's theatre and musical groups. They study and complete their homework assignments from inside prison cells. The annual graduation exercises are held in the visiting room, normally used as the meeting area for inmates and their families. While the men are technically students in college, they are still physically in prison. It is therefore essential that their teaching and learning can still 'count' as college, with the same meaning and significance that the activities of higher education would have in a more traditional setting. This conceptualisation of the prison college as a figured world is similar to that used by Urrieta, Martin, & Robinson (2011) in their study of identity reconstruction among young African American males taking college courses in North Carolina youth correctional facilities. Their study thus set an important theoretical precedent, and their findings will be discussed in greater detail in Section 3.3.

I theorised that an investigation of Hudson Link students would reveal not just one but a variety of figured worlds of which the men were members. As Dewey (1916) pointed out earlier, the prison itself would operate as a social realm in which the aims of individuals influenced and were influenced by community life. My view of these worlds would therefore begin with the prison college and expand to an awareness of each student's individual housing block and social circle within the prison, the prison at large, and the families from which they were removed but of which they were still a part. Though I only interacted with students within the figured world of Hudson Link, I found evidence in their writing of the many other realms in which they operated throughout their lives – school, sports teams, “street life” and more.

The literature indicates that one of the primary features of a figured world is how it shapes sensemaking: the creation and interpretation of the meaning of every day events. Bruner and Haste (1987: 10) argued that “We try to make sense of [words] by treating them to memory, knowledge, and association. We make them ‘mean’ by locating them in our known world.” Conceptualising the prison college as a context for understanding experiences by creating their meaning would now be important to the study.

3.2 Making sense of experience

Having identified figured worlds as a construct that could help locate the processes of higher education within the prison college, I wanted to know how participants made sense of their past and present experiences, as both producers and audience of culturally transmitted messages. Therefore I required a conceptualisation of experience, like Dewey's (1938), that acknowledged it as a fluid body that both shapes and continues to be shaped by future events and their meanings. Rejecting behaviourism, Dewey described experience as operating on a continuum in which we enter into the present moment affected by our experiences of the past. Experience was for him “both a way of understanding or interpreting what happens and a way of anticipating what happens in the future or what to do next” (Pring, 2007: 58), accompanying individuals on their course of decision making in regards to the present and future.

Dewey's views were important because I wanted to know how students thought about their experiences, but also because my investigation of Hudson Link was in itself an examination of an *educative* environment in which that sensemaking is performed. Dewey (1916: 60) theorised experience as essential to achieving what he believed should be the goal of education: the "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increase ability to direct the course of subsequent experience." Dealing with one's past in such a way as to develop an understanding of its meaning and thus shape the ability for further interpretation was at the heart of Dewey's educational ideal. Accordingly, processing and making sense of experience would be a major activity of an educative environment such as Hudson Link.

The sociocultural framework of my investigation indicated that this sensemaking would make use of local, highly specific, and particular knowledge, manifesting as "a social process...an activity that is always situated within a cultural and historical context" (Bruner & Haste, 1987: 1). "Making sense" is a process whose meaning seems fairly intuitive, yet is still quite difficult to articulate. As a teacher and theorist of writing in schools, D'Arcy (1989: 2) offered a useful definition when she argued that in addition to our powerful memories, human beings are born with the innate cognitive "power to arrive at new perceptions by RE-CONSTRUCTING or RE-CREATING how these memories appear to us when we consider them afresh, and subsequently the power to RE-PRESENT our new understandings in a form that after reflection, makes further sense for us" (emphasis original). The meanings and implications we draw from our memories constitute learning and offer us the chance to build insight and perspective out of the raw materials of what happens to us.

The ideas of continuity in experience and the ways that our understanding of the past might affect the present are synthesised in Holland *et al.*'s (1998: 18) concept of history-in-person: "the sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject positions afforded one in the present." By looking at the ways that students made sense of their experiences within the world of Hudson Link, and how they brought those meanings to bear on the present, I could start to understand

their ideas of who they were. To operationalise this part of the inquiry, I constructed the research sub-question:

Does higher education affect the ways in which incarcerated students understand their past and present experiences, and if so, how?

3.3 The Role of Identity

The effects of higher education on identity are crucial to understanding the prison college specifically because of the way the “total institution” of the prison is designed to take away an inmate's sense of identity (Goffman, 1961). As Sykes (1958: 6) reflected in his classic text *The Society of Captives*, “a man perpetually locked by himself in a cage is no longer a man at all; rather, he is a semi-human object, an organism with a number.” But whatever their institutional designation, inmates are still people. They are still human agents with self-awareness and an ability to make certain choices. Within the world of incarceration, prisoners – like human beings everywhere – choose and display identities through activity and alignment with others.

Early fieldwork for this project demonstrated that conceptualising identity would be crucial to my understanding of Hudson Link. In so much of the group talk within this context, students and administrators focus on distinguishing themselves from the general atmosphere and attitudes of the prison. Associating with Hudson Link seemed to be one way for the men to shed some of the negative baggage that comes with the prisoner identity and instead choose what they saw to be a more positive, legitimate self-image – one of a person who, despite the negative influences and very bad odds, was engaging in productive activity that was not only acceptable to society but which would allow them to contribute to it.

Identity is a ubiquitous concept within the study of human thought and action, and has been explored in a wide variety of ways by researchers in the various fields of social science. Beginning with Erikson's (1959) neo-Freudian expansion of the concept of ego, identity has been studied within psychology generally (Marcia, 1966, 1988; Waterman 1984, 1990, 1992; Grotevant, 1987, 1992; Berzonsky, 1990; Adams & Marshall 1996; Berzonsky & Adams, 1999), as well as social psychology (Stryker, 1968; McCall & Simmons, 1978;

Turner, 1978; Burke 1980; Burke & Reitzes, 1981; Hogg & Vaughan 2002), and sociology (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986; Turner 1982, 1985; Côté & Levine 1987, 1988; Hogg & Abrams 1988; Côté, 1993, 1996; Haslam, 2001). Researchers across the disciplines have attempted to determine whether identity is an innate or constructed dimension of self, and to what extent society and culture play a role in its development or construction. More recently there has been a trend towards integration of these approaches based around their common ground (cf. Abrams & Hogg, 1999; Schwartz, 2001; Simon, 2004).

Sociologists have also attended to questions of identity in prison. The most seminal criminogenic studies have focused for the most part on inmate identity within the landscape of prison subculture: whether these identities are created through the process of “prisonization” (Clemmer, 1940) and adjustment to/adoption of prison subcultures; if instead these subcultures emerge in reaction to the various deprivations experienced during incarceration (Skyles, 1958); or if prison subcultures might be the result of norms and practices brought from inmates’ pre-prison identities as societal “deviants” (Irwin, 1970). Related debate asked whether the “inmate code” underpinning prison subculture enforces and prioritises an identity that privileges one’s status as a prisoner above other personal demographics (Sykes & Messinger, 1960; Irwin & Cressey, 1962; Hughes, 1971). More contemporary research has explored the negotiation of prisoner identity, and its engagement with personal characteristics such as gender and sexuality (Bosworth & Carrabine, 2001; Whitehead, 2007; Andersson, 2008; O’Connor, 2008), race and ethnicity (Henderson, Cullen, & Carroll, 2000; Sabo, Kupers, & London, 2001; Wilson, 2003; Crewe, 2005a; Phillips, 2007), religion (Clear *et al.*, 2000; Clear & Sumter, 2002; Kerley, Allison, & Graham, 2006; Maruna, Wilson, & Curran, 2006; Spalek & El-Hassan, 2007; Kerley & Copes, 2009), or some combination of factors (Schmid & Jones, 1992; Bosworth, 1999; Alexander, 2000, 2004; Archer, 2001; Bosworth & Carrabine, 2001; Crewe, 2005b). Identity work has also been conducted on various rehabilitative settings within the prison context (Corey, 1996; Gardner, 2009; Stevens, 2009; Sharma, 2010).

The conceptualisation of identity is also significant to the study of prison education specifically because identity work is a major component in the activities of figured worlds

like the prison college. Holland *et al.*'s (1998: 7) work thus contributed another major guiding influence to this investigation, with their focus on “the development of identities and agency specific to practices and activities situated in historically contingent, socially enacted, culturally constructed ‘worlds’: recognized fields or frames of social life” – a category to which the figured world of the prison college easily belongs. In their conceptualisation, identity is a practice of selfhood that is expressed by being both lived for oneself and projected for others. Identities are practiced in different ways within different social contexts, making it essential to recognise the effect that a particular setting may have on one’s apparently spontaneous displays of self. Again, these settings should not be understood solely as physical surroundings, but rather as contexts for deliberate group activity. For the purposes of this study, it is an accepted premise that even within a seemingly singular context such as the total institution of the prison, human beings operate within a variety of culturally constructed, socially transmitted worlds, in which they prioritise different parts of their identity at different moments in time.

In this conceptualisation, the study of identity is inextricable from the study of behaviour, which Holland *et al.* (1998: 31) identify as “a sign of self in practice, not self in essence”. Identity guides action, since our idea of who we are helps us make choices based on what we believe someone like us would do. We may also have as many permutations for our identity as we have contexts in which to express ourselves. In her study of the construction of identity through the practice of academic writing, Roz Ivanic (1998: 11) explains:

The term ‘identity’ is useful, because it is the everyday word for people’s sense of who they are...It is also a misleadingly singular word. The plural word ‘identities’ is sometimes better, because it captures the idea of people identifying simultaneously with a variety of social groups. One or more of these identities may be foregrounded at different times; they are sometimes contradictory, sometimes interrelated: people’s diverse identities constitute the richness and the dilemmas of their sense of self.

In the process of using semiotic tools such as writing and language, in different ways at different times, we negotiate a set of identities through our behaviour, our choices, and the meanings we assign to them.

Vygotsky (1978: 68) found in his research that the use of tools to mediate behaviour may eventually become so routine – his term was “fossilized” – as to “be moved out of awareness, possibly with no observable trace of the mediating means; ‘the’ act, subsuming its exterior development, became seemingly an essential characteristic of the person” (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 175). According to Vygotsky’s work, the meaning made through the manipulation of cultural tools could become a relatively permanent, apparently “characteristic” part of the tool user. This suggests that parts of a person’s character that seem so natural as to be independent of the context at hand may in fact be such fundamental tools within that context that they have been internalised – “fossilized” – and moved out of the space of identity negotiation.

Of course, if we take seriously the premise of sociocultural theory and the importance it places on context, we understand that as individuals move through other settings, they will be offered other means of semiotic mediation, of meaning making, of thinking about their worlds – and these alternative understandings may take priority at a given time. Looking for representations of identity, therefore, should be done from within the context of interest. In the case of this investigation, it made the most sense to work within the setting of the prison college in order to understand the student identities constructed therein. This was considered when creating the research design, which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

As previously mentioned, Urrieta, Martin, & Robinson (2011) also conceptualised the prison college as a figured world in their study of American American males enrolled in college classes at various youth correctional facilities in North Carolina. In a similar inquiry into how incarcerated males engage in “authoring the self” (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 173) through the pursuit of higher education, these researchers found evidence of “a figured world where the African American youth...were re/positioned as college students rather than inmates, and then authored themselves in new agentive ways” (Urrieta, Martin, & Robinson, 2011: 492). They concluded that the prison college operates as a figured world in which individuals have the opportunity to re-construct their identities. However, beyond the recognition of prestige and power positions generally associated with higher education, their

analysis did not unpack what an identity of “college student” actually meant for the participants.

Another limitation of the Urrieta, Martin, & Robinson (2011) study is that the evidence of these college student identities was gleaned without adequate theorising about the individual programmes. There was no opportunity to view student responses in the context of their particular environments, or to compare those environments or the meanings constructed within them. Despite acknowledging the existence of significant social narratives that programme participants may have been challenging or co-opting (such as the “whitestream, majoritarian narrative, or ‘stock-story,’ laden with issues of power, racism, and discrimination...that African American males are prone to criminality” [494]), they do not examine the extent to which the identity of “college student” might emerge from a similar though competing narrative. Their use of secondary interview data from participants in multiple programmes around North Carolina prevented them from being able to look for the sources of that narrative, or for how the meanings of a college student identity were fostered within any particular setting. Their analysis would also have benefited from consideration of the role of language in constructing those social narratives, as discourse can reveal the very fabric of the thoughts with which we consider ourselves. To explore the relationship between language, identity, and narrative, we must engage with the very large field of narrative theory.

3.4 The Multiple Functions of Narrative

Identity was an important component of my investigation, one that I hoped would help me understand who these inmate students believed and wanted themselves to be, and how those ideals affected their behaviour. Part of this identity construction, mentioned earlier, involves drawing on the tools made available by the figured world of the prison college. One classic tool, as has been argued extensively, is language – “(In Vygotsky’s sense as in Dewey’s) a way of sorting out one’s thoughts about things. Thought is a mode of organising perception and action. But all of them, each in their way, also reflects the tools and aids available in the culture for use in carrying out action” (Bruner, 1986: 72). Language

is a cultural tool, Bruner argued, that contributes to our understanding of who we are and what, as Dewey would have said, we are ‘about’. It stands to reason, then, that the act of using language to produce a narrative text – be it anything from a piece of written discourse to a speech or story – is an identity activity, and that we can examine these texts in order to achieve insight into the author’s sense of himself.

In the research design phase of the project, I chose a methodology that would ask members of the figured world of the prison college to engage in narrative writing activities. This choice was made both for methodological reasons, which will be addressed in Chapter 4, and theoretical reasons, which will be discussed here. In this section I will elaborate on how I approach the resulting student narratives as writing data that both contain important meaning for the authors as well as communicate, in the words of Bazerman & Prior (2004: 3), what these texts *do* and *how* they mean.

3.4.1 Narrative in research

The sheer volume of narrative inquiries undertaken within the field of education reflects the extent to which this approach has been useful for educational researchers (cf. Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). Prison research is also commonly situated in a narrative framework or other qualitative theoretical approach that allows for methodological emphasis on narrative (O’Connor, 1994a, 1994b, 1995a, 1995b, 2008; Maruna, 1997, 2001; Gadd & Farrall, 2004; Fryer, 2006; Ward & Marshall, 2007; Andersson, 2008; Schlosser, 2008; Opsal, 2011). In the qualitative research on inmate engagement with prison education, though limited, there is strong support for the use of narrative as well: Feuerwerker & Mullen’s (1995) investigation of a literacy programme in a Canadian prison, Fine *et al.*’s (2001) landmark study of incarcerated women enrolled in undergraduate education, and Page’s (2009) examination of the inherent tensions and contradictions present in the endeavour of prison education all prioritised narrative as an indispensable approach to understanding incarcerated student experience. To my knowledge, however, no other study has yet conceptualised the narrative identities of incarcerated students against the backdrop of the prison college as figured world.

3.4.2 Understanding the self: Narrative as a pattern of cognition

Narrative was initially considered as a research methodology for this investigation for its ease and instinctive nature. Telling the story of one's own experiences is natural, Chase (1995: 2) argued: "the impulse to narrate is such an integral part of human experience that interviewees will tell stories even if we don't encourage them to do so." But why is narrative – and why are stories – such a natural format through which we communicate our experiences?

According to Bruner (1991), human experience is so easily communicated as narrative because it is primarily understood that way by the mind. Stories, which we are taught to tell from a young age, allow us to assign meaning to what happens to us – meaning that helps organise our understanding of experiences and our memories of them.

Polkinghorne (1998: 11) explained:

Narrative is a scheme by means of which human beings give meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions. Narrative meaning functions to give form to the understanding of a purpose to life and to join everyday actions and events into episodic units. It provides a framework for understanding the past events of one's life and for planning future actions. It is the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful.

In this conceptualisation, narrative is an instinctive method in communicating about experiences because it is such a natural part of the process by which the human mind understands those experiences. Cognitive scientists as well as narrative theorists have discovered that "narrative is one of the most observable ways we conceptualize experience and organize memory" and that "memory is not just partially structured by narratives but is fundamentally narrative in nature" (Eubanks 2004: 36). In asking a research participant to tell a story – to produce a text – we ask them to provide us with a narrative understanding of their history-in-person. Incorporating the conceptual specifics of textual practice into my understanding of narrative was essential given that I planned to ask participants to engage with their experiences through writing.

Ivanic (1998: 24) conceptualised the three versions of self that can be observed in the act of producing a written text. Her first version of self, the *autobiographical self*, is useful

for visualising the research participant upon being asked to write his story. The autobiographical self is found in the writer who, taking up a pen, draws on attitudes, memories, and experiences to construct a text that reflects how he feels he would most accurately be seen. This is the author as narrator and storyteller, who brings a history-in-person, the “sediment from past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject positions afforded one in the present” (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 18), to the act of constructing a text. Just as in Holland *et al.*’s conceptualisation of a self practiced through action, Ivanic (1998: 25) acknowledged that the autobiographical self is ever fluid, as one’s history (and with it, one’s sense of self) is in a state of constant development. “What aspects of people’s lives might have led them to write in the way that they do?” she asked in her consideration of this version of self. In this way Ivanic sought to answer the question of how history-in-person interacts specifically with the act of writing.

Keeping in mind the concepts of history-in-person and the autobiographical self, I recognised implications for data collection and analysis. The primary consideration informed by this understanding was the idea that I needed to come to know the writers in my workshop as people, not just as characters in their own stories. I needed to be able to see the influences exerted upon these writers at the moment of text production. I would not treat their stories produced in the workshop as isolated pieces of text, but as part of a construction process undertaken in the context of extensive experience inventories. The question to consider based on the idea of the autobiographical self would be about how life affects, and effects, text. To connect identity with narrative practice in my investigation of higher education’s effects on incarcerated students, I added the sub-question:

Does higher education impact the identities that incarcerated students construct in their role as narrators of their own histories, and if so, how?

This question would operationalise the inquiry’s focus on the relationship between identity and the autobiographical self.

3.4.3 Authoring the self: Narrative as a method of communication

In addition to the autobiographical selves who authored the stories produced in the workshop, there was another version I would have to find and analyse: the version of self committed to the page. In “Life as Narrative”, Bruner (1987: 692) explained that an essential component of understanding narratives is to see “what we do when we construct ourselves autobiographically”. The goal here would not be to glean a necessarily accurate portrayal of participants’ educational histories, but rather to understand how the construction of the narratives (and of themselves as narrators) revealed the processes of engagement and meaning making in the retelling of those events. The choices that the workshop participants made about events to include and exclude, what to emphasise and what to downplay, and the parts of themselves that they portrayed would shed light on the beliefs and experiences that shaped the written narratives. As main characters in their stories, their values would be found in how they decided they should be seen.

Ivanic’s (1998: 25) second conceptualisation of self in writing becomes useful at this point. The *discoursal self* is that version that the autobiographical self constructs and commits to paper. This is the author’s portrayal of his own identity, “often multiple, sometimes contradictory – which they consciously or unconsciously convey of themselves in a particular written text.” This portrayal may be a one-time occurrence, inextricably linked to the text at hand, or it may draw on and/or represent aspects of a longer-term sense of self. In any case, Ivanic called on researchers of the discoursal self to seek the social conditions and consequences of a text’s production as well as the processes of a discoursal self’s construction (1998: 26).

In addition to the representation of the author as a character in his own text, Ivanic’s (1998: 25-26) discoursal self is also “concerned with the writer’s ‘voice’ in the sense of the way they want to sound” and how “characteristics of the social interaction surrounding these texts led the writers to position themselves in these ways”. The depicted attitudes, beliefs, experiences, and memories are significant not only for the meaning of that expression, but also for understanding the contextual circumstances that led the writer to those choices. As Bakhtin (1973: 167) argued, words are never objective, sterile semiotic mechanisms:

When each member of a collective of speakers takes possession of a word, it is not a neutral word of language, free from the aspirations and valuations of others, uninhabited by foreign voices. No, he receives the word from the voice of another, and the word is filled with that voice. The word arrives in his context from another context saturated with other people's interpretations. His own thought finds the word already inhabited.

In Bakhtin's conceptualisation, words are tools populated by entire generations of usage, in contexts both familiar and strange. Crystallising this idea in the concept of *heteroglossia* – “the simultaneity of different languages and of their associated values and presuppositions” (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 170) – Bakhtin told us that languages are semiotic systems whose meanings change – perhaps subtly, perhaps dramatically – depending on the social context in which they are called upon. Holland *et al.* (1998: 69) chose “authoring the self” as the term to describe the choices between these meaning systems and what they reveal about the contexts with which we choose to align ourselves.

When speaking of authoring the self, and of the discoursal self, we are speaking about choices of representation. Ivanic (1998: 54), however, offered a word of caution:

Expressions like ‘selection’, ‘options’, ‘language choices’ are dangerously misleading. They imply firstly that a particular writer is able to choose freely among alternatives, secondly that the choice is something which resides in the individual will, and thirdly that it is conscious. I want to imply none of these things, but I do believe that the writers’ *unconscious* act of selection from alternatives is an important component in the discoursal construction of identity – constrained by social factors, and highly influenced (though not determined) by socio-historically situated conventions as it is.

We cannot see these “choices” of language and identity as deliberate, self-aware manipulations of a reader. Instead we must view the construction of the discoursal self as the product of meaning making and self-authoring processes which, as discussed in the previous section on identity, may have become habitual – to use Vygotsky's (1978: 68) words, “fossilized”.

Returning to the idea of identity, there is another process visible from the construction of the discoursal self that I found useful to my investigation. In addition to Ivanic's (1998: 25) question of how autobiographical identity shapes writing, I found myself asking how writing shapes autobiographical identity. Holland *et al.* (1998) show how identity, as

discussed previously, is a construct lived for oneself as well as projected for others. The projection of a certain aspect of an individual's identity, in fact, is one way that this identity is cemented for oneself – at least for a time, if not permanently. By this reasoning, the construction of a particular discursal self, using culturally and historically situated language, is an exercise in experiencing that identity through communicating it to others.

3.4.4 Representing the collective: Narrative as social production

In addition to what the student narratives could reveal about the experiences and identities of their individual authors, I wanted to know what these texts said about the sociocultural contexts in which they were produced. Did these educational narratives exist and operate outside my workshop, and if so, how did students learn to tell them? Were they stories these students used to understand their lives when they were outside the classroom? Were these stories parts or versions of a greater social narrative within the figured world of the prison college? If so, what social function did they serve?

To answer these questions, I started with Ivanic's (1998: 25) third conceptualisation of the self in the act of writing: the *self as author*. The self as author deals with the way that writers see their own authority over a text – how much they attribute the content of their texts to another source, and how much ownership they claim for themselves. I do not use Ivanic's approach to authority over the subject matter itself, given that the students' writing was all based on their own lives, and that the narratives were not being presented as valuable on the basis that they were true. Their narrative authority was not in question the way it might be in the kind of academic texts that Ivanic analysed. Rather, it was the authority with which the writers could talk about the *meaning* of those experiences, and where that authority came from. The claim of authorship over the ideas and beliefs found embedded within the narratives would show the extent of their internalisation as well as perhaps revealing the processes by which these narratives come to be learned and repeated.

I noticed from my earliest observations in the field that redemption narratives were both pervasive and strikingly consistent despite the incredibly diverse backgrounds of students in this programme. They almost universally attributed redemption to participation in

college, but further analysis was required to see what other specific traits the narratives shared, and whether these similarities were significant. Each writer's autobiographical self – his history-in-person – would be a primary influence on the text, but if a social meta-narrative existed, there would be common thematic and structural elements from one text to the next. Finding these similarities and their implications would also require caution to avoid the “simplistic notion that identities are internalized in a sort of faxing process that unproblematically reproduces the collective upon the individual” (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 169). The goal of analysis would not be to find a crude re-fashioning of the same basic story told fifteen different ways, but would instead look for evidence of what is widely known as *intertextuality* (Kristeva, 1980; cf. Lemke, 1992).

Intertextuality, Bazerman (2004a: 86) explained, consists of “the explicit and implicit relations that a text or utterance has to prior, contemporary and potential future texts.” Evidence of intertextuality in the participants' educational narratives would suggest that the authority over the meaning of their experiences could have come from a process by which they learned to tell and believe in a particular narrative of their own redemption. If so, this would certainly compel me to consider the utility of those narratives in the greater social context of the prison college.

To understand narrative's potential ability to perform a social function, I found useful Eubanks's (2004: 38) analysis of his study of interviews given by Microsoft founder and executive Bill Gates. Finding a similar thread running through Gates's many interviews, books, and public speaking engagements, Eubanks concluded that Gates used a personal narrative to define the company's mission as well as inspire his audience's ideas about life at Microsoft. “Gates is well aware of his role as a public storyteller, a role that permits him to influence the way the public imagines the inner workings of Microsoft...by looking at his public utterances, we can gauge what Gates would like the public to believe, and we can observe how persistent he is in attempting to shape those beliefs” (2004: 38). Gates's narrative, whether spoken at a conference or told in print via newspaper interviews, operates as a text that shapes Microsoft's organisational identity, goals, and public image.

Before I had a chance to work with the writers in this study, my observational data came mostly from my interactions with Sean Pica, Hudson Link's Bill Gates. Sean himself obtained a college degree through the Hudson Link programme, now serving as its Executive Director. In a wide variety of contexts, I saw Sean define the problem that Hudson Link aims to solve – recidivism – and give a personal example – his own – to explain exactly how it does so. I use the Gates example here because I saw Sean perform this narrative not just with the public, but also with and in front of current Hudson Link students. He uses his personal narrative to define the problem that Hudson Link sets out to solve, as well as to challenge those currently enrolled to find success making similar use of what is being offered to them.

3.4.5 Narrative writing and student identity

So far I have discussed the theoretical conceptualisations of narrative as a pattern of cognition, a method of communication, and a social production, and how each form might engage with the identity of the prison college student. Within narrative research, there is an even more specialised effort to investigate narrative identity within textual practices, such as writing and discourse, constructed specifically within academic settings (Berkenkotter, Huckin, & Ackerman 1991; Davies, 1994; Cadman, 1997; Morita, 2004; Kapp & Bangeni, 2009). This line of inquiry was germane to my investigation given that I planned to position myself inside the world of the prison college and then build my understanding of the setting by asking its members to write. I intended to keep the workshop informal, without the traditional pressures of college coursework such as grades and exams. Still, I would need to attend to the fact that the workshop students carried out their writing within the world of Hudson Link, the physical and cognitive context of their studentship.

Originally designated as part of a framework to understand the writing of students in higher education (Lea & Street, 1998), academic literacies research recognises as its premise that rather than judge student writing against predetermined standards of institutional (university) conventions, we must instead examine students' textual practice in light of their own understanding of it (Clark & Ivanic, 1991; Lea, 1994; Pardoe, 1994; Lillis, 1997, 2001; Ivanic 1998; Lea & Street, 1998, 2006; Lea, 2004; LeCourt 2004, 2006; Moje *et al.*, 2009;

Napoleone & LeCourt, 2011; Thesen, 2001). Moje *et al.* (2009) explained that literacy-and-identity studies tend to agree on three conceptual premises: 1) that identities are socially (rather than individually) constructed; 2) that identities are fluid (i.e. that they are plural, and that one biological being may possess, maintain, and express different versions of their identity at different times); and 3) that identities are recognised by others to various extents that shape and impact their reach and implications. Using this consensus as a starting point, a great deal of work has been conducted examining how student identity might be constructed and expressed through textual practices. These are useful premises even though my investigation is not focused specifically on literacy practices, but on the practices of identity negotiation using available cultural resources – some of which, given the educational nature and purpose of the setting, may be literacy practices.

Academic literacies research requires that our approach to student writing be “concerned with the processes of meaning-making and contestation around meaning rather than as skills or deficits” (Lea & Street, 1998: 159). It aligns itself with New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984; Gee, 1990; Barton, 1994; Baynham, 1995) and critical discourse analysis, viewing “the institutions in which academic practices take place as constituted in, and as sites of, discourse and power” (Lea & Street, 1998: 159). This approach has been especially useful to researchers investigating the assessed written work of non-traditional students, whose processes of assimilation to the linguistic and textual practices of academic institutions may be more complex than the simple accumulation of certain skills (Lea, 1994). The academic literacies framework has since expanded to include in its view writing from across the university, finding broader applications than just the graded writing assignments of those students who, “by virtue of their entry to university via a non-traditional route – are seen as marginalized by a dominant academic culture...whether in terms of age, gender, race or language” (Lea, 1994: 742).

This study of textual practice has put the focus back on meaning, rather than on a straightforward acquisition of skills. The approach thus falls in line with D’Arcy’s argument (1989: 22), reminding us that the study of writing *is* the study of the kind of meaning making described earlier:

We must not at any stage allow ourselves to forget that the act of writing is an act of making sense and of shaping meaning. We should never reduce this act to a product-producing exercise for which the writer has no personal commitment. Nor should we allow ourselves at any grade/age level to pay more attention to the surface features of the product than to the meaning which lies within and behind those features. As teachers, we need to retrain ourselves so that we can look *through* words on a page before we look *at* them.

Above all, we must not be distracted in our analysis by the institutional standards from which the academic literacies approach made its initial departure. Instead, examining student writing for the presence, adoption, rejection, or appropriation of institutional conventions can engage a discussion of identity, power, and resistance.

Questions of power and resistance lead to a related debate within literacy research, focused around the hegemony of certain linguistic genres and the pedagogical decisions that can be made as a result. This chapter has already established the idea, through Bakhtin's (1973) notion of heteroglossia, that words have powerful existing social functions before they are chosen for use in novel scenarios. The choice among possible utterances thus positions a speaker, aligning him alongside others who have chosen the same linguistic genre. Indeed, as Holland *et al.* (1998: 126-127) explained,

One's choice of dialect, register, pronouns, and genre are not socially neutral. Such decisions partake of powerful systems that index claims to the social relationships between speaker and hearer and to the speaker's general social position. Linguistic choice is but one of the indexical systems...The dialect we speak, the degree of formality we adopt in our speech, the deeds we do, the places we go, the emotions we express, and the clothes we wear are treated as indicators of claims to and identification with social categories and positions of privilege relative to those with whom we are interacting.

In an argument that focuses this stance toward linguistic positioning on the specific practice of writing, Ivanic (1998: 32) too advocated for a view of writing as "an act of identity" in which individuals maintain or challenge their positioning within a greater sociocultural context. In addition to alignment with others, the linguistic conventions of privileged communication can also serve an exclusionary purpose. Genre theorists Cope & Kalantzis (1993: 7) highlighted the weight of that potential exclusion in their argument for

literacy pedagogy that proposes student empowerment through awareness and mastery of dominant textual conventions. But critics of genre theory remind us that rather than teaching students to reproduce uncritically the hegemonic textual practices they encounter, we must first examine not only the powerful practices themselves, but *who* decides that they are powerful (Luke, 1997: 309-310). In regards to the study of prison education, this will mean analysing student writing with an eye to the adoption and contestation of institutional discourses, both that of the prison and that of the prison college. Our understanding of the function of these texts will not be complete unless we fully grasp the positioning, and struggle for positioning, that underpins their authors' linguistic choices.

This section has covered the conceptualisation of narrative as a pattern of cognition, a mode of communication, a social production – and overall, as an identity activity. A new operational sub-question reads,

In what ways does an inquiry grounded in narrative writing allow for a thorough and nuanced understanding of the processes of higher education in prison?

This will focus the inquiry on the ways that the sociocultural context of the prison college encourages or nurtures the construction of these narratives.

As an investigation of student writing, my study aims to discover how identities are constructed through the textual practice of producing personal narratives, including the role of experience in their construction as well as the greater social and cultural functions that they serve. However, instead of investigating the ways that the conventions of academic writing might suppress and further silence the voices of the non-traditional students in this inquiry, I ask how they might use these institutional conventions as tools of power and positioning. Analysis of the data revealed that in an environment that offered little choice or opportunity for decision-making and growth, the members of the prison college seemed to use these narrative and identity tools in order to build and maintain a sense of agency. It is the concept of agency to which I now turn.

3.5 Creating and Maintaining Agency

The prison is designed to incapacitate its inhabitants in the interest of public safety. In *The Society of Captives*, Sykes (1958: 73) described one of the greatest “pains of imprisonment” to be what he called “loss of autonomy”, explaining that inmates are “subjected to a vast body of rules and commands which are designed to control (their) behavior in minute detail” – a loss that further detracts from their sense of responsibility for or choice regarding their own actions. Yet according to disciplinary and recidivism records, Hudson Link students and alumni demonstrate a greater measure of self-control than many of their fellow inmates and parolees – often self-control that they themselves say they could not have maintained prior to their participation in college.

In fact it would seem that in the figured world of the prison college, desistance from disciplinary infractions and further criminal activity after release is constructed as an exercise of personal agency. Hudson Link’s remarkable results on these dimensions ask us to consider the influence that participation in college might have on one’s ability to choose a deliberate course of action and then effectively carry it out. The question of how the formation of a student identity might have empowered this kind of awareness and self-control became central to my investigation.

Previous research on desistance from crime posits a variety of theories as to the reasons why convicted offenders might abstain from future criminal behaviour (Glueck & Glueck, 1940; Shover, 1985; Wilson & Hernnstein, 1985; Gottfredson & Hirschi, 1990; Maruna, 1997; Laub & Sampson, 2001; Farrall & Maruna, 2004; Gadd & Farrall, 2004; Vaughan, 2006; Maruna & Roy, 2007; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009), though many such theories, such as the inverse relationship between ageing and criminal behaviour, are often demonstrated but still not well understood (Matza, 1964; Hirschi & Gottfredson, 1983; Moffitt, 1993; Farrall & Maruna, 2004). Within this research field is a cluster of studies that specifically investigate personal agency and the potential use of narrative in its development. Kerley & Copes’ (2009) study of identity maintenance after religious conversion in prison and Vaughn’s (2007) work on self-reflexivity in rehabilitation both draw on the idea that successful desistance is developed through commitment to a reconstructed narrative identity.

McKendy's (2006) analysis of oral lifestory narratives he collected from men serving time for violent crimes in Canada, as well as O'Connor's work on incarcerated men's discourses of violence (1994a; 1994b; 1995a; 1995b; 2008) both investigate how the development of agency through narrative-supported identity reconstruction might lead to more authentic, lasting rehabilitation of criminal offenders. These studies demonstrate a promising line of inquiry targeted at the tools of both identity and agency as constructed and engaged with through narrative processes.

Maruna (1997) investigated the specific role of narrative in desistance with his analysis of published autobiographical writing by convicted criminal offenders. From a sample of 25 written life histories, Maruna (1997: 66) chose the twenty narratives in which the authors "seem to experience significant changes in their behavior or outlooks toward crime by the end of the autobiographies". He called these accounts "life narratives of reform" (1997) and in his later work, "redemption narratives" (2004). In the course of his analysis, Maruna found evidence of "a type of subjective self-understanding expressed in narrative that seems to support desistance from crime" (1997: 61), which he suggests is drawn on and adapted from a Western cultural meta-narrative of "going straight".

Among the content categories Maruna (1997: 84) found within the common meta-narrative that ran through his sample were themes of agency and communion discovered through the process of reform. This agency, he suggests, is realised through "perceived possibilities for identity change in the life circumstances and situations narrators face." The communion element is found in content related to networks of support that offenders find in their journey to "go straight", which often appear in the form of reform organisations like Hudson Link. In fact Maruna points out that in almost every personal transformation narrative he analysed, the change agent to which narrators attributed their redemption was an outside influence, be it a religious experience, a brush with death, or the meaningful support of a social services organisation. "By pushing the responsibility for reform onto some power other than the self," Maruna (1997: 83) wrote, "narratives maintain a sense of consistency and believability".

It is also worth mentioning that unlike in the previously discussed narrative inquiries into more mainstream educational settings, prisoners' reform narratives have a unique job to do. These redemption stories are often drawn from histories-in-person that include sources of deep and palpable shame. Using narrative to cope with the past and to develop a sense of agency in spite of actions that even the authors themselves find appalling and dreadful is a remarkable process, the magnitude of which should not be overlooked. As Maruna, Wilson, & Curran (2006: 180) explained, this narrative identity "can integrate disparate and shameful life events into a coherent, empowering whole, renew prisoners' sense of their own personal biography, and provide them with hope and a vision for the future." Not only must these narratives help overcome potent shame and disappointment, but they must also be powerful enough to create that "hope and vision for the future" in an environment that gives their authors very little control over their circumstances or reason to believe that they alone can change them. It is in fact the distinctive function of these redemption narratives that make them so important for consideration, as they speak volumes not only about individuals' experiences but also about the value systems by which the stories and their narrators have been influenced.

Having acknowledged this previous work, however, it must be said that research considering the role and development of agency in desistance from crime has not yet included in its scope the processes of higher education and their effects on those outcomes. The relationship between participation in higher education, the development of agency, and the sociocultural context in which these activities take place has not yet been fully developed and understood. Furthermore, a general sense of the relationship between education and the development of agency would not be enough to understand the specific processes at work amongst the members of the prison college's figured world.

According to Dewey (1938: 64), "The ideal aim of education is creation of power of self control." But against the backdrop of the agency work just discussed and the creation of identity through activity undertaken in conjunction with others in a specific sociocultural context, this explanation is far too simplistic. The notion that identity is expressed through behaviour indicates that identities and, by extension, the narratives that help maintain them,

are critical tools in every day decisions about what to do, and about *who* those decisions ‘make’ us. Further conceptualisation is needed to understand the processes by which identity could facilitate the development of agency in individuals engaged in group activities with joint meanings and aims.

To explore the connection between identity and agency, I turn again to Holland *et al.* (1998: 40):

Persons develop more or less conscious conceptions of themselves as actors in socially and culturally constructed worlds, and these senses of themselves, these identities, to the degree that they are conscious and objectified, permit these persons, through the kinds of semiotic mediation described by Vygotsky, at least a modicum of agency or control over their own behavior.

Identity, functioning in this way, acts as a tool, in the Vygotskian sense, born and developed within a specific context and which frees the user from being at the mercy of every momentary whim. The prison college student does not take a calculus class because calculus will keep him out of prison in the future, but because acting out the identity of college student will allow him to direct and control his behaviour in pursuit of a specific long-term goal. This was Vygotsky’s intention for the use of tools, as in the classic example of the handkerchief tied in a knot around one’s finger to act as a reminder to complete a task wholly unrelated to handkerchiefs, knots, or fingers (1981: 138).

Just as in the definition of figured worlds, it is not the idea one has of himself in his head but the actions that he executes in response to that idea of himself. One’s notions of identity cause him to live out for himself and project for others an image, via actions, of what someone like him would do. In making these choices, he exerts control over his behaviour using the rules of the sociocultural context to which he has committed himself. In so doing, he may be able “to figure and remake the conditions of [his life]” (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 45) even in a total institution like the prison.

It is behaviour that contributes to and develops agency with which we are concerned. Like Vygotsky (1981), Holland *et al.* (1998: 38) consider the specific pathways by which individuals learn to exercise direction and control over their environment through their behaviour. If identities act as tools of agency, and if narratives serve as the basis for and

reminder of those identities, then the process of decision-making that follows is what Holland *et al.* (ibid.) call *symbolic bootstrapping*: the means by which “one modifies one’s environment with the aim, but not the certainty, of affecting one’s own behavior – and it requires a sustained effort...may not succeed, and, except for rather small-scale changes, is clearly beyond the ability of any individual to accomplish alone.” Unlike in the traditional connotations of ‘bootstrapping’ – as in the phrase, ‘pulling oneself up by the bootstraps’ – symbolic bootstrapping is focused on the ongoing effort rather than the ultimate outcome. This version of bootstrapping, instead of emphasising the need to accomplish something independently, is an effort that *depends* on others for any chance of success.

To the limited extent that they can exert influence over their environment, Hudson Link students choose to situate themselves within the prison college setting along with the other members of that figured world. In doing so, they commit to the project of affecting their own behaviour and can only do so through individual action mediated by the larger sociocultural context. As in Cain’s (1991) work with Alcoholics Anonymous, the situation remains tenuous and participation by no means guarantees a positive outcome. When students leave the classroom – what Tannenbaum (2000: 78) referred to as the “Switzerland” of the prison – they return to the greater context of incarceration and the other figured worlds in which they operate, and any number of things could happen that would result in the loss of their ability to attend college. Some of these incidents will be beyond their control; others may overwhelm them to the point where other immediate priorities (physical survival not being unlikely) take precedence over their long-term goals. At these junctures, other aspects of their identities may be foregrounded. But the presence of fellow students around the prison, the example set by Sean Pica and some of the released alumni who now return to the prison to teach Hudson Link classes, and those alumni whose names are universally known as programme “success stories” reinforce the aims and dedication to personal change.

These acts of identity construction and subsequent bootstrapping are achieved through the use of cultural tools. The search for these became central to the investigation. Following Voloshinov's (1986: 39) line of reasoning that “expression organizes experience” as well as Bakhtin's work on heteroglossia and the multiplicity of voices in individuals’

discourse, Holland *et al.* (1998: 189) stated that “Utterances...are constructed between socially related and thus positioned persons. Since utterances organize experience (as the source of the psyche itself), we are strongly affected by the position we are cast into within interactions.” There was the idea, then, that amidst the members of this figured world I would find common forms of expression that communicated the values and meanings assigned to various experiences. As discussed previously in Section 3.4.6, I would expect to find these characteristic forms of expression evident in their writing as much as in their public and individual discourse.

As my time in the field progressed, I observed that the personal narratives that students had learned to tell themselves, each other, outsiders, and me very much resembled the personal story in Alcoholics Anonymous, which Cain conceptualised as a tool of agency: “Remembered stories, re-creations of one’s own story, can be purposively used to redirect oneself away from the impulse to take a drink, to interpose new actions, and to cast oneself as a new actor in a new social play” (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 281). The reorganised versions of students’ histories-in-person, including their imagined endpoints, became tools that facilitated their process of bootstrapping. Considering this, it became clear that my study of narratives within the context of the prison college had to take into account not only how these stories were distributed but also how their recipients learned to interpret their own experiences in the same way.

3.6 Trajectory

Thus far I have described how individuals engaged in the joint action of sociocultural contexts create identities as a means to guide their understanding and behaviour. One by-product of the identity reconstruction process is the creation of narratives, which act as tools, reminding their users of how they have organised their experiences and of who they are as a result. An essential narrative component that has not yet been fully considered is the imagined endpoint of these stories. While all individuals face an effectively uncertain future, we have an understanding – or a hopeful guess, at least – of where we plan the paths of our

lives to take us. This presumed, hoped-for trajectory acts as a compass for both our everyday and more momentous choices.

Turner (1996: 4-5) explained that this perceived trajectory is again the work of narrative as a pattern of cognition. “Narrative imagining – story – is the fundamental instrument of thought,” he wrote. “It is our chief means of looking into the future, of predicting, of planning, and of explaining.” It is a natural function of the human mind to look for the resolution, the conclusion and ‘moral of the story’, the lesson to be learned – although our life story is not yet truly complete, and when it is, we certainly won’t be available to write it down.

The role of narrative trajectory in criminal rehabilitation has been the focus of previous research. Maruna (2007: 85) found evidence of “generativity scripts” (cf. McAdams, 1988, 1993) in the published texts of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated authors, in their often cited “desire to ‘give something back’ to others who may not have been as fortunate as they were”. Gardner (2010: 84-85) similarly found in his investigation into what he called the “future talk” of incarcerated young men that a third of the participants in his study expressed “a desire to help others or help younger people...expressed through images like wanting to help others ‘avoid the mistakes I made’ or help youngsters ‘stay out of gangs’”. Such studies provide justification for further research into the use and effects of narrative trajectory, as well as context for my own findings. Yet these ideas need further development, as the previous inquiries in the field did not explicitly investigate the roles of sociocultural context and joint group activity on the construction of these narratives from within figured worlds.

My preliminary fieldwork activities revealed that the promise of a “brighter future” is an enormously significant part of the prison college context. This promise acts as a major draw of potential students to the programme and was a pervasive part of the casual and formal group talk that I observed. Just as memories and their meanings are cemented through the construction of identity narratives in sociocultural contexts, students’ ideas and hopes for their futures are also developed in the storytelling process.

Prison college students cannot change much about their physical surroundings just by enrolling in classes. Spending the evenings in a different building of the facility and perhaps remaining in their cells to do schoolwork rather than going out to the yard is about as much tangible change as they will see. However, the trajectories that they conceive for themselves inspire what Holland *et al.* (1998: 236) would call “alternative worlds” – spaces in which imagined possibilities are taken seriously as potential realities and acted on as such. These trajectories are goals that, if treated as real futures, may be effected through the very process of being hoped for and worked toward. The Vygotskian notion of semiotic mediation through the use of tools, Holland *et al.* (1998: 281) wrote, requires us to:

attend to people’s collective ability to imagine themselves in worlds that may yet be scarcely realized, and to the modest ability of humans to manage their own behavior through signs directed at themselves...These aspects of human agency...enable the creation of new worlds and new identities and make us appreciate how figured (objectified) identities become important tools with which individuals and groups seek to manage one another and their own behavior.

These imagined worlds, yet “scarcely realized” as they may be, live within the trajectories that rest at the envisioned conclusions of students’ identity narratives. It became clear that looking for the ways that the writers projected their future selves would be an important part of my analysis process.

Experience, specifically Dewey’s (1938) conceptualisation of it, also makes an important contribution to our understanding of students’ future trajectories, as demonstrated by Engeström’s (2007) study of organisational learning through collaborative problem solving. In three empirical settings, he observed a gap between solution design and solution implementation in the face of an obstacle to some collaborative effort at customer service-oriented products. He rejected *identity* as a possible method of bridging such a gap, arguing that although “practitioners facing major transformations in work must somehow see themselves as individuals taking on a new personal identity”, the concept of identity is both too fraught by its multiplicity of meanings and too fixed to be applied to situations requiring adaptation to changing needs and environments. Instead, Engeström (2007: 37) put forth the idea that one has to “experience the future”, as they “put themselves into imagined,

simulated, and real situations that require personal engagement in actions with material objects and artefacts (including other human beings) that follow the logic of an anticipated or designed future model of the activity”. Practitioners, he argued, have to live out the features and meanings of their hoped-for trajectories as if they were real in order to overcome the hurdle that lies between the design of a solution and its implementation. As always in Dewey’s concept of experience, actors undergoing such experiences are themselves transformed as they shape the previously external environmental elements that now play a role in their transformation.

Engeström (2007: 38) framed his study as a call for further theoretical development of his hypothesis about *experiencing the future*, and indeed it is a conceptualisation rich with possibilities for the study of prison education. The “gap between design and implementation” of which Engeström (2007: 36) wrote was one experienced in client service, but it is also a gap that has very real meaning and implications for incarcerated students. In the free world college students might experience the future by completing academic work, not all of which they necessarily enjoy, but to which they commit in anticipation of the employment rewards that work will later bring. Their need to experience the future in terms of that academic effort should, at least in theory, be relatively short lived, lasting only as long as their pursuit of the degree and subsequent job search. Experiencing the future may even come easily to them, as those around them act out understanding of their efforts in the context of that expected future. In contrast, incarcerated college students’ experience of the future must be vivid and convincing enough to counteract the tangible physical and interactional markers of their present reality. Experiencing their future as college graduates means being able to envision a trajectory beyond prison, though they may have years or even decades left to serve after graduation, and though they may not receive the same validation or legitimisation of their efforts by prison staff or even family members. Some act out those meanings now, taking on roles as counsellors or peacekeepers on their housing blocks, or by joining or starting service organisations within the prison. As will be seen in Chapter 7, some make plans for how they will put their college education to work for them after prison. They experience the future by acting out “imagined, simulated, and real situations that require personal engagement in

actions...with other human beings” (Engeström, 2007: 37), and they do this through their participation in the college programme and their interactions with other members.

Given the importance of the envisioned endpoint of students’ identity narratives to our (and their) understanding of experience, I constructed a final operational sub-question in order to guide the data collection and analysis:

Does higher education affect the imagined trajectories of its participants, and if so, how do students engage with these trajectories in their daily lives?

Tying together the relationship between higher education and students’ understandings of their past, present, and future would facilitate an emergent understanding of the ways in which higher education engages with students ideas about their experiences, their identities, and the actions and choices they would make as a result.

3.7 Closing Remarks: Research Questions

As a sociocultural study of incarcerated students’ activities within the figured world of a prison college programme, this inquiry looks at how people use their memberships within social worlds to decide, essentially, who they are and what they intend to do about it. A theory of experience that emphasises the continuity between the past, the present, and the future, as well as the understanding that we make sense of our experiences within particular contexts at particular moments in time, lays the foundation for this inquiry. As people act within their various social realms, they forge identities through their self-positioning and behaviour, creating narrative understandings of themselves that draw upon the cultural resources and tools available to them as members of those realms. In communicating these narratives to others, they signal their membership within certain social worlds as well as their goals for that membership. Their stories of self draw on their individual pasts as well as their collective present – an unmistakably academic setting, despite the prison environment, whose impact on students’ discourse will be revisited throughout the analysis chapters. The creation and negotiation of these identities can be viewed as agentic action, allowing for enhanced control over one’s behaviour through sustained joint activity. Participation in the identity

activities described in this chapter exists alongside, or perhaps is aimed towards, an anticipated future that requires such engagement. In “experiencing the future”, and in living ‘as if’, students anticipate – even *create* – the results of their successful membership in the figured world of college in prison.

My study aims to discover how incarcerated men engage with higher education, and how the figured world of the prison college affects and shapes this engagement. The guiding question of the study therefore reads:

How do prisoners use higher education to make sense of their lives?

By looking at how the prison college offers semiotic resources that help students make meaning of their experiences, I can use the sense they make and the identities they construct to discover how they understand and plan their lives. Taking all this into consideration, five operational sub-questions developed within the umbrella of my main guiding question:

- RQ1** Does higher education affect the ways in which incarcerated students understand their past and present experiences, and if so, how?
- RQ2** Does higher education impact the identities that incarcerated students construct in their role as narrators of their own histories, and if so, how?
- RQ3** Does higher education affect the imagined trajectories of its participants, and if so, how do students engage with these trajectories in their daily lives?
- RQ4** In what ways does an inquiry grounded in narrative writing allow for a thorough and nuanced understanding of the processes of higher education in prison?
- RQ5** What is the nature of the relationship between participation in and graduation from the Hudson Link programme and post-graduation/post-release outcomes?

(The fifth sub-question will be explained in Chapter 4.)

This chapter has covered the conceptual framework that guided the design and execution of this project as well as the analysis that will be presented in Chapters 5 through 7. As I move towards answering the questions presented here, the next chapter will explore the justification of my methodological design, its consequences in the field, and its implications on my resulting data.

Chapter 4: Methodology

My entire life changed in seconds.

-Francis

4.1 Introduction

This study examines the educational experiences of incarcerated men enrolled in an undergraduate degree programme at Sing Sing Correctional Facility, a maximum-security prison in New York State. Unlike many other studies in the field, it does not ask whether or not education “works” at keeping incarcerated men from committing another crime after their release. Instead, it uses a sociocultural perspective to investigate how participation in a prison-based higher education programme does or does not influence the ways that students make sense of their experiences. It asks about the development of any new understandings of their lives and what if any impact these interpretations have on their thoughts of the future. Many of the men enrolled in this programme have not been successful in past pursuits of formal education, and few ever see tangible benefits such as reduced sentences or better employment prospects upon release. Knowing this, they still place enormous value on the experience of higher education in prison. This study asks why.

Other researchers interested in the experiences of students pursuing education while incarcerated have approached their inquiries in a variety of ways. The Prison Educational Participation Scale, created by Boshier (1983) and revisited by Parsons & Langenbach (1993), asks prisoner-students to rate 60 possible motivations for pursuing education on an influence scale of 1 to 4. The items then break down into five categories: Personal Control, Self Assertion, Outside Contact, Self-Preservation, and Cognitive Interest. While the 60-item scale was based on a fairly exhaustive list of possible motivations, I still did not want to limit the range of student responses in the way that a quantitative methodology such as surveying would require.

In their study of youth offenders enrolled in college courses in North Carolina, Urrieta, Martin, & Robinson (2011) enhanced their quantitative survey data, 329 self-

reported postal surveys, with ninety qualitative interviews conducted with students from the various facilities. However, all of these data were collected for a statewide evaluation of North Carolina's Youth Offender Program college courses. Moreover it is not clear whether Urrieta, Martin, and Robinson were on the evaluation team who authored the survey instruments and conducted the student interviews, or if they were analysing secondary data collected by others. Additionally, rather than using a random sample of youth offenders as respondents, the North Carolina Department of Corrections selected the students and faculty members who would be interviewed. This sampling method, along with the fact that the data were collected as part of an evaluation, could have created bias that the authors do not acknowledge or address.

Basing my understanding of the context on single staged conversations with participants who had never met me before did not seem to offer the opportunity to build the kind of rapport that is so necessary in the prison setting. Yet I had limitations in what fieldwork activities I could reasonably expect to arrange. On the other end of the qualitative spectrum from basic interviewing lies Fine *et al.*'s (2001, 2004) evaluation of the college programme at Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, using participatory action research. I would have faced extreme logistical challenges without what I would call the *methodological capital* of Michelle Fine's team, who appear to have had the enthusiastic support of the prison's administration. Fine and her graduate students were even able to teach a research methods course for women in the college programme, who then worked as research assistants and interviewers throughout the project. Based on my time in the field, I can confirm that the participatory action research methods they implemented successfully at Bedford would almost certainly have been considered so radical as to be out of the question at Sing Sing. The design I eventually chose was a compromise, bridging the desire for data rich in depth and breadth with the parameters of what was actually possible.

As discussed in Chapter 3, the sociocultural nature of this inquiry required that my design attend thoroughly to the unique features and complexities of the research context. My methodological choices, greatly influenced by both ethnographic research and narrative inquiry, were also guided by ethical and logistical considerations, both of which will be

discussed here. After an outline of the study's research questions, I will describe my sample, outline my main sources of data and data collection/generation activities, and explain my processes of analysis and interpretation.

4.2 Research Questions

The guiding question of the study, as explained in Chapter 3, reads:

How do prisoners use higher education to make sense of their lives?

This overarching question was operationalised through a set of research sub-questions, which were constructed in order to draw out the possibilities for “making sense” and the full range of experiences implied in the consideration of one's “life”.

RQ1 Does higher education affect the ways in which incarcerated students understand their past and present experiences, and if so, how?

The first operational research question asks how participation in college engages with the meanings that students make of their experiences. This chapter will show how data generation activities called students to draw upon those experiences in a way that allowed me to access both their understandings and sensemaking processes.

RQ2 Does higher education impact the identities that incarcerated students construct in their role as narrators of their own histories, and if so, how?

The second sub-question reflects early observational data, which indicated that higher education engaged students' ideas of who they were. This chapter explains how I examined the interaction between participation in college and student identity, using systematic analysis of autobiographical self-construction both in writing and in researcher-participant interactions.

RQ3 Does higher education affect the imagined trajectories of its participants, and if so, how do students engage with these trajectories in their daily lives?

The third sub-question of the investigation asks how students think about higher education in terms of their future and vice versa. This chapter will demonstrate how I examined students' future talk and writing to understand more about the perceived relationship between their participation in college and their imagined outcomes.

RQ4 In what ways does an inquiry grounded in narrative writing allow for a thorough and nuanced understanding of the processes of higher education in prison?

Narrative writing was initially chosen for its methodological potential in a long-term investigation of identity construction. The writing and revision of autobiographical non-fiction created tangible records of students' self-constructions as narrators of their own educational histories. The workshop format facilitated trust and openness between myself and the participants and gave me the context I needed to understand the writing. In this chapter I will reflect on the usefulness of narrative writing in the investigation and analysis of students' sensemaking processes, tasks that required me to draw on the analytical writing and journaling I did as part of my practice of keeping field notes.

RQ5 What is the nature of the relationship between participation in and graduation from the Hudson Link programme and post-graduation/post-release outcomes?

Gaining access to the research site required quantitative analysis of outcomes data, which was also valuable later in framing my findings within a previously unavailable basic profile of the educational provider. This chapter will show how this quantitative work facilitated access and how it enhanced my qualitative understandings.

The rest of this chapter outlines the data generation and analysis performed to answer the research questions set out in Section 4.2. Section 4.3 explains the research design of the project, which drew on a mixed methods approach in order to meet the full scope of research needs. Section 4.4 lays out the details of the writing workshop I conducted as my main source of data generation, including participant recruitment, workshop activities and feedback, and the process of documenting these research activities. Section 4.5 shows my methods of data analysis and how I used the various datasets in tandem. The chapter ends with a review of the project's ethical considerations, in Section 4.6.

4.3 Research Design and Methods

Answering my research questions required a design that employed a mixed methods approach in order to meet a wide range of research goals and needs. Qualitative methods were clearly more appropriate for addressing my questions regarding participants' past and present experiences of education and how these experiences affected the construction and shaping of their identities. Answering these questions required the work of an in-depth study conducted with a small number of participants, for whom qualitative methods were more useful (Bryman, 1992). Building a quantitative dataset, however, was necessary both for accessing that qualitative data and for understanding it. A description of the research needs and resultant methods will demonstrate the necessity of my research design.

4.3.1 Quantitative Data Needs

The first and most crucial need to be met by my research design was access to a research site. Access is perhaps the most common obstacle in prisons research, especially for inexperienced or novice researchers (Irwin, 2008; King, 2000; Noakes & Wincup, 2004; Schlosser, 2008). Research applications take a very low place on an administration's list of priorities, and are often met by "widespread reluctance" (Bosworth *et al.*, 2005: 251). I knew firsthand from failing to gain access to a prison during my M.Sc. degree research just how difficult and time consuming this process could be. My research design needed to address this.

The challenge of access was mitigated by the fact that Hudson Link could facilitate my entry to the research site by acting as my patron (Lee, 1993). However, this meant that access depended on a mutually beneficial arrangement with Hudson Link, in which I could provide a service in exchange for the opportunity to pursue my own research interests. One of the things they needed most was the quantitative analysis of their twelve years of student files. Hudson Link has only three full-time staff members, so their scarce manpower as well as limited financial resources had thus far made it impossible to conduct such analyses. The files could not be removed from the prison and had never been examined for a systematic

collection of even the most basic information. My ability to fill that need opened the door to a research arena where the qualitative data I wanted could be accessed.

The quantitative data were also important for obtaining the “structural” details of the research context, whereas my qualitative data attended more to the “processual” features (Punch, 1998: 247). The substance of the quantitative dataset I collected was indeed necessary in my effort to build a descriptive profile of Hudson Link’s most basic programmatic features. Without this information I could not have conducted an informed exploration of the pedagogical context in which its students pursued their degrees.

When I was preparing to enter the field, I understood Hudson Link’s basic operation: it was an undergraduate degree programme that worked with a local accrediting institution – Mercy College – to allow inmates at a maximum-security prison to pursue Associate's and Bachelor's degrees in Behavioural Science. But there were several basic features of the programme that I could not discern from my conversations with Hudson Link personnel, such as:

- How many inmates have participated in the Hudson Link programme during its twelve years of operations?
- What is the average age of a Hudson Link student?
- What is the previous educational attainment of the average Hudson Link student?
- What is the average sentence length of a Hudson Link student?

Before my work with the student files, no one from Hudson Link or the prison could have offered more than an educated guess as to how many people Hudson Link had served over the twelve years of its operation. Even much of the information that Hudson Link staff believed to be definitive turned out to be based on estimates. For example, I was told upon my arrival how many degrees Hudson Link had awarded over the years of its operation. However, my initial examination of their graduation rosters revealed copious errors, sometimes listing the same person receiving the same degree in two different years, and sometimes omitting graduates completely. There was no accurate record.

One of the pieces of information that Hudson Link was most interested in having officially verified was their famed 0% recidivism rate, which was commonly cited but effectively anecdotal without any documented statistical evidence. The collection of the relevant information was once again necessary for access but also important for my own use. Students' lives after prison education, and how their further experiences in corrections compare to those who have not undertaken such an endeavour, would certainly add another layer of understanding to my overall concept of what prison education means for those involved. Even more importantly, the effects of higher education on post-graduation and post-release outcomes make up an inextricable dimension of the question of prison education's very existence. Hudson Link receives financial and institutional support specifically because alumni have demonstrated such a remarkable tendency for staying out of prison after they graduate and parole out. For this reason, the question of whether or not higher education "works" at reducing recidivism is one with which Hudson Link actively and attentively concerns itself. Outcomes data *mean* something to the members of the context of interest, and to resist engagement with a topic so central to the ethos of the organisation would not be observant of a true sociocultural approach to the inquiry.

4.3.2 Quantitative Data Collection

With these needs in mind I began collecting quantitative data approximately one month before my substantive research sessions began. I hand copied 349 student records and retyped them into an electronic database outside the facility. The data collected from files included names and identification numbers, enrolment dates, previous college credits, and, where applicable, degrees awarded and years of degree awards, time to completion of a degree, and reason for leaving the programme. Once these data were collected I completed the dataset using the Inmate Lookup feature on the Department of Corrections website, adding the birth date, arrest date, minimum and maximum sentence lengths, parole eligibility date, and current incarceration status for each man on whom there was a student file. A description of the analysis of these data follows in Section 4.5.1.

4.3.3 Qualitative Research Needs

The sociocultural basis of my inquiry highlighted the importance of the setting insofar as it emphasised the significance of context in the study of pedagogical environments (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). So beyond a basic profile, I required a research design that would help me understand the day-to-day operations of Hudson Link. The daily functions of the organisation, its interaction with prison administration and professors, the tangible ways in which it served its student body, and the interpersonal dynamics among staff and students would be necessary features of a programme profile that facilitated understanding of the learning context. The details of this highly unusual and unique setting would also be necessary in order to consider the possible generalisability of my findings to other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This was taken into account when creating the research design.

Another priority was that the inquiry give a prominent position to participant-generated data. From my own reading I found that the most useful and insightful contributions to the research literature were those provided by inmates themselves (Hughes, 2000; MacGuinness, 2000; Reuss, 2000; Fine *et al.*, 2001; Rose, 2004). I wanted the voices of the men in this programme and in this inquiry to form the basis of my understanding of the context and the activities undertaken within it. This direct participant input was especially crucial considering the usually silenced nature of this population (Schlosser, 2008). Bosworth *et al.* (2005: 251) clearly articulate the importance of empowering incarcerated participant voices through giving them a primary role in the research. I was committed to their assertion

...not only that research proceeds by virtue of the labour of many people but also that the researcher and participants share the common bonds of humanity. Prisoners are not numbers. They are living, breathing people with personalities, characteristics, likes, and dislikes. In the current penal climate, as more and more people are locked up all the time, this simple observation is all too often forgotten.

Not losing sight of the individual human beings in this project – and giving their voices a prominent place in the inquiry – was of paramount importance to me.

Finally, to answer my research questions I would have to gain understand participant engagement with experience and identity, and on how the processes of higher education might influence or affect this engagement. Participants needed the opportunity to project their

identities, whatever they may be, and I needed the chance to watch that process as it emerged and progressed. I would have to do this without the use of any sort of recording equipment, which is not allowed inside the prison. With all these concerns in mind, I employed a variety of methods in order to collect (and in some cases, generate) the relevant data as well as frame them for understanding.

4.3.4 Qualitative Data Collection: Observation

Ethnographic observation and limited participation in various aspects of Hudson Link's operation fortified my understanding of the prison college setting (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The bulk of these observations took place over a period of six months, during which time I made weekly or twice weekly visits to the prison, as well as three months before and three months after in which I attended one-time events and special occasions. These events included things like the 2009 and 2010 Hudson Link graduation ceremonies, open meetings of the Hudson Link board of directors, and alumni "networking" dinners for released graduates. I was not particular in terms of sampling for observation; I simply attended every function to which I was invited. If no invitation came, I asked for one and was almost always granted permission to attend.

I also spent copious amounts of time in Hudson Link's office in the town of Ossining, engaged in whatever small task I could help out with – anything from stuffing envelopes to sorting and folding donated clothing. These activities awarded great insight into the organisation's daily operations and the extent to which the programme narrative that I later observed inside the facility may have come from those on Hudson Link's staff. They also put me into more of a "marginal position of simultaneous insider-outsider...poised between stranger and friend" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 112) than I would have been able to achieve sitting in a corner, observing and taking notes more conspicuously.

The last site for observation was my workspace outside the prison's internal college office, where I was regularly engaged in the culling of quantitative data for several weeks before the start of my primary research activities. This vantage point allowed me to watch students undertaking independent or group work, meeting with Hudson Link staff, or

completing registration paperwork with one of the inmate clerks. Eventually some of the men who came to recognise me would stop and chat for a few minutes on their way to other business. The qualitative data gathered during these unstructured observations (Punch, 1998) were collected and transcribed using methods described in Section 4.4.7. It contributed to the analysis and understanding of the writing data in ways that will be explained in Section 4.5.

4.3.5 Qualitative Data Collection: Autobiographical Writing Workshop

The quantitative and qualitative data collection described above was conducted in large part to facilitate and frame an investigation into the ways incarcerated students use higher education to make sense of their lives. To engage with this question I designed an autobiographical writing workshop in which I would ask a sample of prisoner-students to reflect upon and write about their educational experiences. Details of this workshop are covered in full in Section 4.4.

In Chapter 3 I showed how my theoretical framework helped me conceptualise the ways in which Hudson Link offers its students opportunities to make sense of their experiences and to construct and live out identities that reinstate their feeling of personal agency. I argued that these opportunities were visible events such as the graduation ceremonies and other group activities where seasoned members of the organisation developed and modelled their own sensemaking processes for newer students. What occurred to me after I had long since left the field was that in fact, my writing workshop was one such opportunity that Hudson Link provided for its members. I believe that the Executive Director of Hudson Link knew – instinctively if not consciously – that making sense of their educational experiences through speaking and writing is an important part of how Hudson Link students practice and solidify their identities. The details of the writing workshop will demonstrate my meaning.

4.4 The Writing Workshops

The writing workshop format has enjoyed considerable success in United States classrooms since its advent in the 1980s (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986; Atwell, 1987, 1998),

bringing with it a shift in focus from writing product to writing process (Willis, 2001; Jasmine & Weiner, 2007). As originally conceived, the workshop model allowed group members the independent writing time needed to generate, explore, and develop their ideas, eventually seeking feedback from their peers by reading their work aloud. The workshop facilitator led short, targeted “mini-lessons” on specific writing techniques and skills, as well as conferenced individually with students to keep them on task, check their progress, and provide assistance (Calkins, 1986; Atwell, 1987). The goal was to give students more choice in the writing process, which would in turn foster independence, confidence, and the development of their own unique voices. Designed originally for young children, the writer’s workshop format has been adapted for use with a variety of ages (Sowers, 1985; Danielson & Wendelin, 1992; Ray, 1994; Calkins, 2006; Brause, 2010), including adults in both academic and non-academic contexts (Perl & Avidon, 1981; Phillips, 1991; Hollis, 1992). The format has also proliferated in the prison context, with a wave of prison writing workshops led by professional American writers and novelists over the last decade (Jones & Pommy Vega, 1999; Salzman, 2003; Lamb, 2003, 2007; Shelton, 2007; Coogan, 2009; cf. Carnochan, 1995).

The bulk of the data generated and analysed for this project came from autobiographical writing workshops I conducted with two groups of men in the college programme. My approach was slightly different than the writer’s workshop as it was first conceived (Graves, 1983; Calkins, 1986; Atwell, 1987), as I aligned myself more closely with the ways the model has been re-interpreted and revised over the last two decades (Atwell, 1998; Taylor, 2000). Atwell’s (1998) updated writer’s workshop design addresses the frustrated critiques of classroom teachers who wanted their students to benefit from the empowering parts of the model without missing instruction on the competent use of the “codes needed to participate fully in the mainstream of American life” (Delpit, 1988: 296). The re-conceptualised role of the workshop facilitator (Atwell, 1998) acknowledges that providing students, especially disadvantaged ones, with the concrete skills necessary to produce academically and socially acceptable prose contributes to rather than stifles the original model’s overall goal of student empowerment (Taylor, 2000).

I chose this facilitator stance in large part because I recognised that participants were making a significant time commitment to be a part of the workshop, which would ask them to complete extra writing in addition to what they were already doing for their courses. I also knew that there were risks involved in their participation, including emotional stress from the writing process or from sharing their work with classmates. Therefore, I planned the workshops under the assumption that the men sacrificed their time and took those risks in the hopes that they would get something out of it. This realisation drove the ultimate design of the research activity, by forcing me to think about what would best serve the men as growing and developing writers, in addition to what I hoped I would learn from them. In this way I was constantly “negotiating a way to be useful” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

I aimed to give students “the resource of the teacher’s expert knowledge, while being helped to acknowledge their own ‘expertness’ as well” (Delpit, 1988: 296), offering students the skills to become stronger technical writers while leading them to recognise the vast resources and knowledge already available to them as human beings. As a workshop facilitator I encouraged them to use me as a sounding board, rather than an instruction manual, for structural and creative choices about their writing. The concrete ways that I positioned myself as such will be explained further in the rest of this section.

The writing workshop format also held methodological advantages in my attempt to understand identity construction and sensemaking processes without the possibility of using a tape recorder. I envisioned the writing workshop as a comfortable, informal group setting where the men could compose and discuss their writing with each other and me, helping to reveal the processes behind the products. This writing and discussion would provide a written record of the way its authors constructed and developed their narratives – and narrative identities. The use of narratives directed and generated by the participants rather than the researcher also fell squarely within my sociocultural approach, by privileging the individual’s account of his own development within the context of interest (Vygotsky, 1978; Penuel & Wertsch, 1995).

The workshop format was essential in the development of research relationships that would have otherwise been difficult to build. It facilitated more personal interaction than a

larger context would have allowed, but still gave the men a chance to judge over time, in a non-threatening small group setting, whether they could trust me. Getting to know the men in the group both as people and as writers through individual writing conferences was also crucial in being able to discern their opinions, perceptions, and insights regarding the writing process.

The students wrote and submitted 88 pieces of writing over the course of the two writing workshops. In the rest of this section I will explain the various aspects of the writing workshop as a research activity, including the following: the participant recruitment and the resulting workshop sample (Section 4.4.1-4.4.2), my approach toward this sample (4.4.3), the workshop activities and how they generated my data (4.4.4), the feedback process and how this might have affected the resultant data (4.4.5), my role in the workshop context (4.4.6), and how documentation of the workshop process assisted me in my analysis (4.4.7).

4.4.1 Participant Recruitment

The sampling method for the autobiographical writing workshop was chosen for reasons of logistical necessity. I had originally planned to advertise the workshop using flyers, but upon arriving in the field I realised that I would need administrative approval for any document I wanted to display or distribute inside the prison. We had the prison's approval for the workshop, but not for the flyer advertising it, and that permission would have taken too long to obtain. Nor was I sure that even if I received approval for the flyer, it would be at all useful in attracting participants. Ultimately I decided to forgo the flyer and use the programme's academic director and alumni clerks to disseminate information about the workshop via word of mouth. For each workshop, the academic director took charge of recruiting students and presented me only with a final list of names.

I selected this sampling method because my precarious position at the facility did not allow me any greater measure of control over it. Qualitative research does not necessarily demand representative or random samples if it is appropriate to use a purposive sample in order to address particular research questions (Punch, 1998), and snowball sampling is especially prevalent in studies of "deviant" populations (Lee 1993: 68). I did not plan to

generalise my findings to the entire Hudson Link student body on the justification that my sample was representative; still, I would have preferred a sampling method that offered an equal opportunity for participation to all the men in the programme.

Yet, I believe that this sampling method also carried an unexpected strength: in allowing Hudson Link a measure of control over who joined my workshop, I was able to see whose stories they specifically wanted to see told to an outside researcher. I don't believe the entire sample was handpicked to satisfy anyone's personal motive; I know some students actively requested to join or were chosen because they needed or wanted to improve their writing. But it would have been impossible not to notice when reviewing my observational data that many of the men in my workshop were the same men asked to speak to guests after facility tours, to write for the Hudson Link newsletter, and to tutor newer students in their remedial and introductory-level subjects. It is clear that some of the men in my workshop were pillars of the Hudson Link community, most likely selected for this task because they were known to be good representatives for the programme. In the same way that the students chose the events they wanted to represent them as narrators, Hudson Link told me its story by putting forth the students they thought would be most apt at telling it. Rather than see this as a weakness in the sampling strategy, or as somehow undermining the 'truth' of the messages I received during my time in the field, I took advantage of the opportunity to locate and analyse the story that Hudson Link tells itself and wants to tell others *about* itself.

4.4.2 Workshop Sample

There were six writers in the first group and nine in the second, for a total of fifteen writers over the course of both workshops. Figure 3 shows the writing workshop participants' demographic data.

Name ¹⁶	Age	Sentence	Sentence completed	Time in HL ¹⁷	Degrees earned
Andrew	37	17 years	4 years	2 years	
Noah	25	13 years	4 years	1 year	
Will	30	20 years	9 years	2 years	
Kenneth	53	17 to 20 years	9 years	3 years	
Paul	30	12 years	1 year	In first year	
Kieran	24	23 years	4 years	1 year	
Francis	63	20 to life	13 years	5 years	A.S.
Cameron	36	25 to life	14 years	1 year	
Ben	42	25 to life	14 years	2 years	
Chris	34	25 to life	9 years	1 year	
Ryan	50	21 to life	14 years	6 years	A.S., B.S.
Michael	40	17 to life	13 years	4 years	A.S.
Jonathan	36	15 years	10 years	3 years	A.S.
Graham	36	22 to life	8 years	1 year	
Nathan	28	9 to 11 years	4 years	1 year	

Figure 3: Demographic data of writing workshop participants

I did not intend or require the workshop sample to be representative of the entire population, as I was more interested in getting participants with a wide range of experiences and opinions. Trying even to define the “average” Hudson Link student would contradict my inquiry’s sociocultural concern with individuals’ experiences and their meaning.

Nonetheless, readers may well wonder how the men in the writing workshops fit into the overall demographic landscape of Hudson Link. Figure 4 gives a rudimentary overview of four key characteristics, showing that the workshop sample was roughly comparable to the Hudson Link population at large.

¹⁶ Workshop participants’ names have been changed.

¹⁷ Time calculations were rounded down to the nearest year, so a student who has served 23 months or fewer would be listed as having completed one year.

	Writing Workshop Members	All active HL Students
Age	37.6 years	36.9 years
Minimum sentence	18.7 years	19.2 years
Time served to date	8.6 years	9.3 years
Time in Hudson Link	1.8 years	1.6 years

Figure 4: Average demographics of writing workshop members (n=15) as compared to the entire population of active Hudson Link students (n=89)

4.4.3 Approach to Participants

It should be said at the outset that I admit to being “pro-inmate” insofar as prison education is an effort that I believe in, and that I believed in when I began designing this project. While I do not see this thesis as advocacy for the cause of prison education, I have hoped from the outset that the understanding and knowledge I would gain from undertaking it would be the basis for future efforts that may in fact cross over into advocacy. It therefore occurs to me that many will wonder how that I could remain ‘objective’ and unbiased when I supported the aims and goals of Hudson Link before I examined their operation from the inside. There was some understandable initial concern that my support of and sponsorship by the programme would somehow cloud my view of the context or the individuals within it, or would otherwise cause me to suppress negative information I might unearth in the process.

Reuss (2000: 40) dismantled the automatic assumption of bias in the event that the teacher-researcher believes in the positive possibilities for participants within prison education as such:

...the researcher who also teaches cannot fail to notice that some kind of ‘transformation’ may be occurring in students throughout the teaching and learning process. Any commentary on this as part of the research process may well be misinterpreted as bias. Education courses in prisons create a potentially favourable ‘climate’ for the students who attend them, a climate in which there is plenty of room for personal growth. Commenting on the positive outcomes of that process does not amount to bias in favour of prisoners; although it may be interpreted as such by those with a more cynical approach.

It does not seem at odds with the standards of any field of social science to assume that a researcher can recognise and separate her own feelings about a given context from the work of the inquiry at hand. In undertaking this project I acknowledged that education clearly had

something to offer the men in the college programme, and that the academic community and general public stood to gain something valuable from understanding their efforts. The fact that my approach advocates for the recognition of prisoners as human beings and for treating their opinions and accounts as the foundation of my understanding should not be interpreted as bias, but as good methodological sense.

Additionally, prison researchers are often confronted by the accusation that they cannot see research subjects clearly because they might feel sorry for them – that the research might be “contaminated by sympathy” (Reuss, 2000: 41). For my part, I deemed it necessary to cultivate empathy rather than sympathy for the individuals in the research setting (Reuss, 2000). Seeing another’s situation from his point of view is crucial to understanding his choices and experiences, and the ability to do so would be applauded in most other research settings. Empathy, therefore, seemed useful to me in this context, as it would be in any attempt to gain understanding into the memories and motives of another. In her reflection on the subject of researcher bias, Liebling (2001: 475) confirms that in her experience as a prison researcher, “there is a link between openness, warmth, ‘devotion’ to the task, the capacity to be sympathetic, and the depth at which the research process operates. The more affective the research, in terms of shared feelings and experiences, the better the fieldwork gets done on the whole.”

4.4.4 Workshop Activities

The writing workshop commissioned its members to explore their educational experiences through a series of in-class and take-home writing exercises over the course of ten weeks. In planning the workshop sessions and assignments, I chose to focus on the four questions from Atwell’s (1998: 22-23) updated writing workshop sourcebook that I felt most relevant to the adult students in my research context:

- How do I help students develop ideas for writing that have meaning and purpose in their lives?
- How do I help individuals get control over formatting, spelling, punctuation, capitalisation, and other conventions?

- What resources and materials will we need for them to grow as writers?
- How do I talk to – and collaborate with – [students] in conferences so that I’m showing them how to act on their intentions, not hoping they can find their way on their own?

Figure 5 shows the resulting lesson goals, content, and materials for each workshop session. How I used these activities to satisfy the above four questions will be addressed in the rest of this section.

I spent a total of approximately 25 hours with each of the fifteen workshop participants. During the roughly two-hour sessions, I delivered mini-lessons on a variety of basic creative writing techniques, and created opportunities to practice and reinforce these skills through in-class writing exercises. To a certain extent, I allowed the direction of the discussions and the workshop as a whole to be chosen and pursued by the men and their interests. In one session, for example, I gave the time I had budgeted for a different activity to a review of correct apostrophe usage (its/it’s, how to indicate possession in words ending in ‘s’, etc.), because several of the men requested it. These exercises allowed me to address the question of how to help individuals get control over the conventions of standard written English (Atwell, 1998: 22) – and the fact that they frequently asked for this kind of instruction told me that I wasn’t stifling their creativity by offering it to them.

I also photocopied and distributed reading selections from a variety of creative non-fiction writers in order to demonstrate that memoir as a genre has been and can be approached in many ways. Outside reading is not part of the standard writer’s workshop model, but I chose to provide it anyway because I knew that the men’s access to books was limited to the small prison library, their course texts, and whatever they could afford to purchase on their own. I made it clear that these were not mandatory reading assignments, and that students should only read them if they wanted to and had the time. I started each session by discussing that week’s text for a few minutes at the beginning of class with whoever had read it, and we revisited the readings throughout the course of the workshop as real-world examples of concepts covered in the individual sessions.

The writers in my workshops informed my understanding of their engagement with the processes of education through a series of take-home assignments in which I asked them

to write as much or as little as they wanted in response to the prompts listed in Figure 5. I emphasised repeatedly that every workshop assignment was optional, and was to be undertaken only if students had time. I only had a few students who ever handed in late assignments due to other schoolwork, but around midterms and finals it was more common, especially for those working on manual typewriters.

I needed to focus the writing in a way that addressed my research interests, but wanted also to “help students develop ideas for writing that have meaning and purpose in their lives” (Atwell, 1998: 22). Therefore I did not write the prompts aiming to elicit responses to any particular question, but rather to see what events students would *choose* to showcase when given a frame that allowed for a broad assortment of possibilities. I also timed the prompts to maximise opportunities to practice skills covered in class sessions. A description of each prompt and reflection on its effectiveness is provided in Appendix C.

Session/ Date ¹⁸	Session Topics	Session Activities	Take-Home Writing Prompt ¹⁹	Optional Reading ²⁰
Session 1	-Introductions -Informed consent	-Review informed consent -Class contract -Note cards	-First Day of School	-Zinsser -Welty
Oct 13				
Jan 19				
Session 2	-Show, Don't Tell -Descriptive Writing	-Show/Tell exercises	-Learning to Read -Six-word memoirs	-Didion -Wright
Oct 20				
Jan 26				
Session 3	-Self-editing -'Cutting the clutter'	-Descriptive verbs -Sentence revision	-Why College?	-Sedaris -Jessamy
Oct 27				
Feb 2				
Session 4	-Dialogue	-Sensory writing -Dialogue writing -Punctuating dialogue	-Inspirational Teacher	-Foreshaw -Zinsser
Nov 3				
Feb 9				
Session 5	-Structure -Theme development	-Discuss Foreshaw memoir -Pivotal moment -1:1 conferences	-Tell me the story of your education.	-Klosterman -Ginzburg
Nov 10				
Feb 23				
Session 6	-Character development	-Character development techniques -1:1 conferences	-Continue work on final memoir.	-Sedaris
Nov 17 th				
Mar 2				

¹⁸ The first date under each session number is the session's date from the first group of writers; the second date represents the session's date with the second group of writers.

¹⁹ Each prompt listed in this column is discussed in greater detail in Appendix C. For a sample take-home assignment sheet, see Appendix A.

²⁰ The full reading list can be found in Appendix B.

Session 7	Work on final memoir	Partner Workshop Part 1	-Continue work on final memoir. -Revision of partner's essay.	-Thompson -Obama
Nov 24 th				
Mar 9				
Session 8	Work on final memoir	Partner Workshop Part 2 1:1 Conferences	-Continue work on final memoir.	
Dec 1				
Mar 16				
Session 9	Group 1: Closing Group 2: Work on final memoir	Group 1: Reading Group 2: 1:1 Conferences	-Continue work on final memoir.	
Dec 10				
Mar 23				
Session 10²¹	Group 2 only: Closing	Group 2 only: Reading	-Continue work on final memoir.	
March 30				

Figure 5: Writing workshop activities, by week and group

²¹ N.B. The second group had one more class session than the first, in order to accommodate the greater number of individual conferences needed due to the larger group size.

4.4.5 Feedback Process

On a volunteer basis, the men read their pieces aloud during each weekly class session and gave each other verbal feedback according to a class contract that each group composed and agreed upon on the first day. I also provided them with extensive line edits and a page of written comments on each piece. There was a standing offer to edit any further drafts the men wanted to write, and many did turn in revisions even when I did not specifically ask for them. The following figures are examples of each of the types of written feedback that students received from me. Figure 6 depicts the line edits made on the second page of a student's draft. Figure 7 shows the part of my attached written feedback pertaining to the content in Figure 6. I also gave verbal feedback in individual conferences with the men, using the time to help the writers develop their own ideas about what they wanted from their writing. My suggestions and opinions were offered, as much as possible, in a way that encouraged them to act on their own authorial intentions (Atwell, 1998: 23).

The fact that my own hand touched the pages of the student writing so many times over the course of their production begs reflection into the co-constructed nature of the data in this inquiry. Initially very concerned about the influence I might have on the resultant data's validity, I worked extensively in advance of the workshops to establish what sorts of commentary would be appropriate and what textual decisions might be better left to the discretion of the workshop members. My interest was in their construction of themselves as narrators, not necessarily in sentence-level linguistic choices, so I did not feel that line edits or overall thematic feedback would interfere in that process or my understanding of it. Furthermore, I saw in the generation of co-constructed data the potential "to disrupt the dehumanising othering that is prison's principal social accomplishment" by positioning myself alongside the men, working together to make sense of the context (Phillips & Earle, 2010).

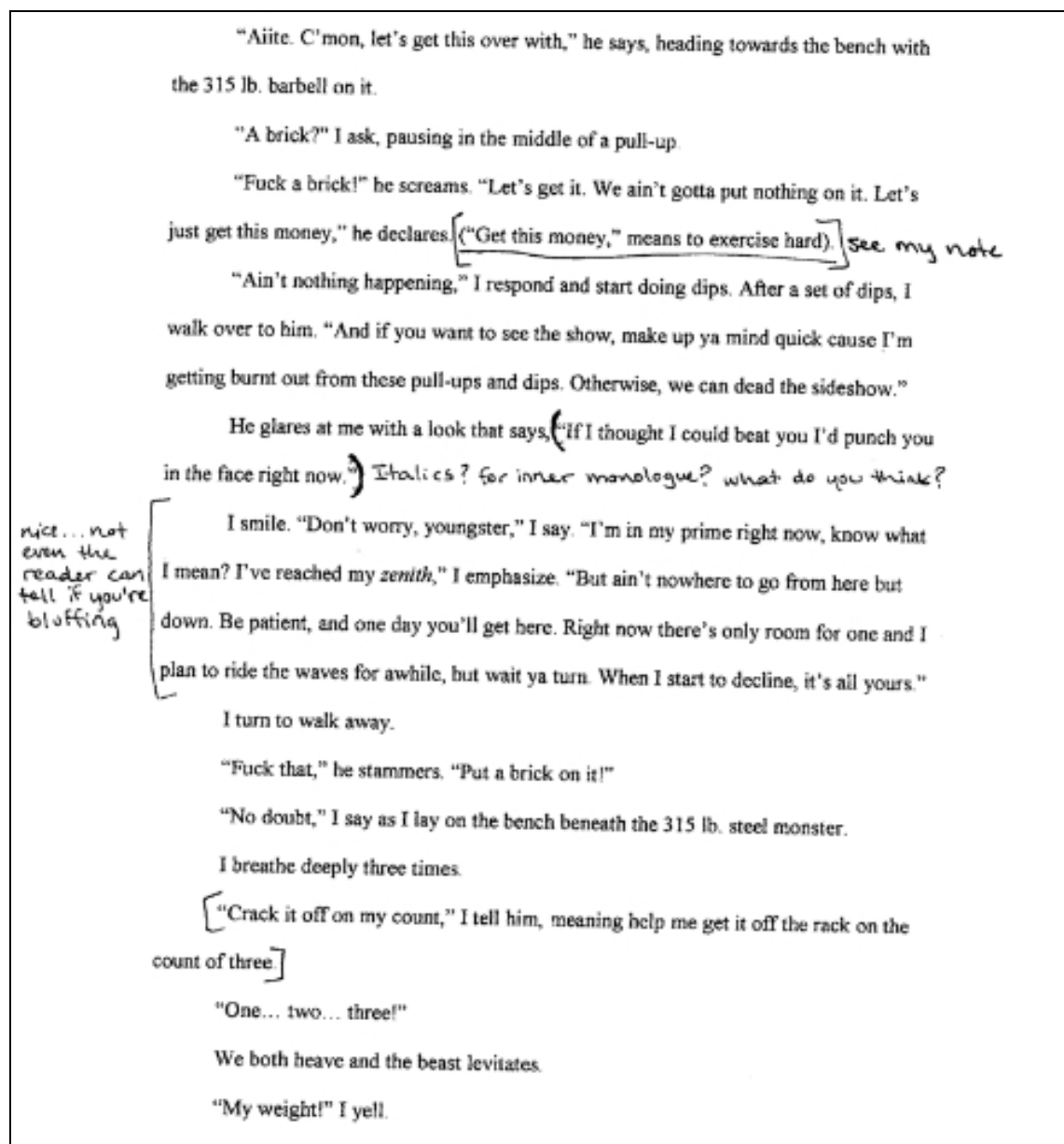


Figure 6: Line edits

I was really pleased to see all the "lingo" you included – lines like "weight pit", "Put a brick on it," "Let's just get this money," and a handful of others (I've marked them with square brackets). These are the kind of unique details that make a narrative really characteristic and strong. But we need to find a smoother way to use the phrases and then explain what they mean. In some cases this can be accomplished simply through context ("weight pit" on page 1 and "Crack it off on my count" on page 2 seem like places where context will do the work for you) and sometimes you'll have to be a bit creative about it.

Figure 7: Written feedback

It is nonetheless worth recognising that the edits I made to the men's work were the product of my own personal background of participating in and leading creative writing workshops at the undergraduate level. Despite my contributions being naturally characteristic of my own training, I tried as much as possible to encourage the men to direct their own writing rather than ask me for guidance. When pressed for advice about "what direction to go in" – something that came up frequently, especially in the writing process for the last prompt – I tried only to echo what the men had already written about in their other pieces, believing they had chosen those stories as the ones they most wanted to tell (Chase, 1995: 9). Moreover, my grounding in sociocultural theory highlights the fact that as an individual, *I too* created meaning from my experiences researching this context. Rather than try to deny my effect on the data, I instead take the position that "narrative can be understood as a joint construction and as 'a' not 'the' representation of the ways in which members of a group inscribe a social world, identity, knowledge and practice" (Kryatzis & Green, 1997). It is my role in the research context and how it may have affected the resulting data to which I now turn.

4.4.6 My Role in the Workshop Context

I decided early on to conduct my inquiry from within Hudson Link, rather than going through the facility's regular research request channels. Being introduced by the facility's administration would likely have made it much more difficult to gain the trust of the men in the college programme. Aligning myself instead with a site of resistance to their limiting institutional identities positioned me as someone more likely than not to be an ally (Bosworth *et al.*, 2005: 255). Actively seeking to recognise the participants' student identities showed that I was receptive to the Hudson Link story, and may have provided participants with "reassurance that the ethnographer [did] not harbour feelings of disapproval, nor intend[ed] to initiate action against them" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 73) – though this reassurance had to be provided repeatedly throughout my fieldwork period.

Working from within Hudson Link, I led a prolonged activity that looked, felt, and operated like any other credit-bearing college course, taking for myself the role of teacher as

well as researcher. Atwell's (1998) updated approach to the role of the workshop facilitator helped me negotiate my place between teacher and novice – between offering participants something valuable and respecting their inherent insight and expertise regarding the context. In doing so, I eventually came to embrace the role of teacher by recognising the ways in which, “instead of diminishing or silencing their voices...raising my voice, in the company of students in the workshop, [could have] the effect of strengthening theirs” (Atwell, 1998: 48). I could see that using my position to help the men master the concrete skills and standards of written English gave them the confidence to explore their ideas both independently and creatively.

In this way, my work bore similarities to teacher research – not in the sense that I as a teacher investigated my own practices in the classroom (Ashton-Warner, 1963; Stenhouse, 1983; Goswami & Stillman, 1987; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 1998, 1999; Hollingsworth & Sockett, 1994; cf. Rudduck & Hopkins, 1985), but that I used their writing to help me understand the students and their textual practices (cf. Borgman, 1986; Stumbo, 1992; Orta, 1996; Ivanic, 1998; DeCristofaro, 2001; Fecho *et al.* 2006; LeCourt, 2006). In my time leading the workshop I came to care about the men and relate to them as a teacher would have: when asked I helped with work for other classes, I attended their graduation ceremony at the end of the year, I met their families and told them what a pleasure it was to work with their son or father. The data that inform my thesis emerged from those relationships.

Despite presenting myself as a part of Hudson Link, I also enjoyed certain advantages by deciding not to conduct pure teacher research as a Mercy College professor for the programme. Offering my writing workshop as an optional extracurricular activity meant that the men saw me differently than they might see their other instructors; at times, they came to me with questions they said they were too shy to ask in their accredited classes. I initially believed that the mistrusting environment of the prison would make it impossible for the men to open up to me (Irwin, 2008: 520). However, because I was not a Mercy College professor, member of Hudson Link staff, or employed by the prison in any way, many of them saw me as being somehow untainted by the effects of that environment.

I saw evidence of this, for example, in the many warnings I received from research participants that I should be very careful about who I trusted; they assumed that I did not already know the lay of the land and would be less likely to understand the rules of what they called rampant “game playing”. Perhaps “it was my status as ‘stranger’ that made them feel comfortable writing or talking to me” (Letherby, 2000: 105). However as much as this helped me learn about the figured world of the prison college and its members, it also meant I could never get “the whole story”. My status as a young, female, civilian outsider with limited access, resources, and time presented inevitable obstacles to understanding the larger prison context that was mostly hidden from my view.

As for how the data might have been affected by my demographic characteristics, it is of course not possible to know how the students’ writing would have been different in a workshop led by an older woman, a man, or a non-white person. Reuss (2000: 35) asserts that no matter the attempts at neutrality, prison classroom dynamics will inevitably be influenced by the gender of the parties involved, and that it is all but impossible to remain truly neutral in any sense. She even suggests that the adherence to gender roles may be necessary, “because...in a setting where role-playing as a strategy for survival is honed to a fine art for penal practitioners, prisoners and civilian staff alike...The roles both normalise and regulate the social situations and experiences which individuals create there”. For my part I tried to mitigate the effects of these dynamics by cultivating awareness and acknowledging them when I could see them in play.

I noticed several times that not only my status as an outsider but also my own personal characteristics, being a young woman of small stature, led many of the participants to stop in the middle of discussions to fill me in on something they assumed I would not understand. It was certainly the case that without them I was unaware of the many goings-on and routines of life in that prison, and of the “street life” to which many attributed their current incarceration. Still, it struck me as funny to see how surprised the men were when I demonstrated *any* accurate knowledge of “the street”. In a discussion with one participant about the “Why College” assignment, I said I understood that many young people did not see the value of college when they could easily make more money in half the time standing on

the corner (a reference to selling drugs). He started laughing, astonished, and said, “Standing on the corner? How does a little girl like you know about a thing like that?” – highlighting both my assumed ignorance of the “street” as well as at least one participant’s distinct awareness of both my gender and age. As reflections of participants’ awareness of and positioning towards me, moments like this one were recorded and transcribed using a process that allowed for their incorporation into the data analysis procedures. Section 4.4.7 explains the documentation process in full.

4.4.7 Documentation

In this section I will describe the documentation and note taking practices employed to keep track of both the observational and workshop conference/discussion data. I was not allowed to have a tape recorder inside the prison at any time, as recording and all other electronic devices were restricted by the prison administration. I therefore had to rely on memory and field notes to record my observations as well as the discussions that took place in the workshop room. As my written notes would be the only resulting documentation of my fieldwork activities, it was important to record as much detail as possible.

I generally did not write notes during my observations, wanting to avoid being “engaged in a continual process of jotting down notes, seizing notebooks during conversations, and similar activities” which “would prove totally disruptive to any ‘natural’ participation” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 177). Rather I waited until I was alone, either in a quiet moment between activities or on my own after leaving the prison, to do so. This was true of both the observational data in which I was a passive participant as well as the workshop discussions in which I was an active one. Each time I left the field, I sat for several hours and wrote down everything I could remember seeing or hearing during my time inside the facility that day, as well as notes on my own interpretations of these events. As a rule I did this within eight hours of leaving, but in exceptional cases, usually due to extreme fatigue, notes were recorded the following day.

My handwritten field notes from observations and the workshop filled two 120-page notebooks and were then typed up, a process that served a number of important functions.

First and foremost it allowed me to create a dated chronological record of my activities and understandings, adding bits of detail remembered retrospectively during transcription to ensure a sufficient level of thick description (Geertz, 1973). It was crucial that in using my notes to justify my findings, I would supply the reader with enough ‘insider knowledge’ as to be able to judge my conclusions for herself (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Furthermore it allowed me to separate my direct observations and memories of participants’ remarks from the “analytic ideas” that came up while taking note of my own interpretations of things (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 191). In this way I also avoided the temptation to validate any analytic idea or conclusion simply on the basis that I was ‘there’ and so I ‘know’ (Hammersley, 1992: 52). The use of notes in the analysis of participants’ remarks, our conversations, and the resultant data can be found in section 4.5.

An example of a transcript from a class exercise on descriptive writing appears in Figure 8. The discussion depicted was reconstructed with the help of a diagram I had drawn in my notebook replicating the appearance of the chalkboard. Words underlined and in bold are those I wrote on the chalkboard. Those in parentheses describe non-verbal actions while those in square brackets are my own notes added retrospectively for clarity.

Me: Okay, great guys, that’s great. So now let’s think about, how do we show.
Physical description [can’t remember who said this]
 Ryan: Yeah like, he was as big as a doorway...
 Cameron: Showing them in relation to other things. Comparing them to things.
 Me: So, comparisons? Like “he was as big as a doorway?”
 Cameron: Yeah exactly.
Comparisons
 Ryan: Yeah I took my nephew to see the USS Intrepid [he means Intrepid]...you know that ship downtown? And when we got there he just sat down and looked up and was like (makes a stunned face and doesn’t say anything)...he didn’t say a word. He was just looking up at it like he never seen anything so big.
 Cameron: Yeah, people’s reactions to things.
Reactions

Figure 8: Sample transcription, group discussion

The order of activities in my workshop lesson plans was chosen specifically so that I would have time to write as many notes as possible without having to break eye contact while a research participant was speaking. If I had three in-class writing exercises, for example, I would space these out in a way that afforded the opportunity to record a sort of field note skeleton of three different large chunks of time. My in-class notes helped me remember the flow of discussions like the one in Figure 8.

When I knew I would have to address the class at any great length, as I did when I had to explain the informed consent documents, I typed out ahead of time exactly what I would say, and then either read from it as if reading from notes during a presentation, or practiced it several times in order to memorise it. Then in my field notes I could reference the large chunks of my own speech without having to remember it word for word. Figure 9 contains a sample of my notes from a session with long bits of my own speech.

I finished reading the information sheet out loud.

Me: Does anyone have any questions on this?

Noah: For your thesis are you just looking at Hudson Link or are you looking at other programs and doing like...a comparison study?

Me: No, I'm just looking at Hudson Link. I'm just looking at you guys. (Pause, look around) Okay, let's go through the consent form.

Read the consent form out loud. Only deviations from what was written were adding "that's myself or Ms. Mohammed" after points 6 and 7.

Figure 9: Sample transcription, long monologue

I always tried to be as honest as possible in cases where something going on in my own thoughts might have affected my understanding, my perception, or my ability to remember a particular interaction. Figure 10 gives an example of this from the second session

of the second workshop, in which a few students joined the group a week late. Francis asks a question, and the discussion proceeds from there.

Francis: What are we writing about?

Me: Well, you can write about anything. One thing that I said last time that I promised not to say again, (I look at the other men apologetically) that I do have to say one more time, is that you should feel free to write about anything as long as it is not about criminal activity not already known to the authorities. Just in case. It could happen that someone goes through my notes, and sees what you've written, so you should not write about that. Otherwise you can write about anything you like. Okay? Are you happy with that?

Francis: No, not exactly.

(Laughter around the room.)

Me: No? You're not happy with that? Okay, why not?

Francis [hard to understand him because I'm not used to his accent yet but this is my best approximation]: Well it can be painful to write about these things but you need to write about them to get them out. But you're feeling all the feelings again that you felt at the time and it can be very painful. So I'm okay with it but I don't feel happy about it.

Ryan: I think memoir can help a little bit because it has a more narrow focus, like what this guy (indicates Zinsser piece) was saying. Because otherwise it can be really hard to think about your whole life in totality. It would be too hard to think about everything but in memoir you can focus on just one part of your life. Like the first day of school, was it really school or was it the streets of Brooklyn?

(General agreement.) [But not sure of the exact words said around the room...I think at this point I was still knocked off my game trying to understand if Francis was upset or hating me or what.]

Figure 10: Sample transcription, emotional reaction

Initiating talk about criminal activity often made me uncomfortable because I was worried about alienating my participants; that much is clear from this segment of notes where I believed Francis was “hating me” for bringing up the subject. I believe that deciding to record my own feelings, in cases like these and elsewhere in my notes where I reflect on the

emotional impact of the research settings and interactions, was a methodologically sound decision that was significant to the analysis process (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 192). The examples I have provided here are all from the writing workshop, but observational data were recorded and transcribed using the same typing-up procedure described earlier. The analysis of my notes, both general field and workshop notes, and the incorporation of that analysis with the student writing data, is addressed in the next section.

4.5 Data Analysis

Type of data	Function of data	Format/ Amount of data	Method of collection	Method of analysis	Method of reporting
Quantitative	-To create basic programme profile -RQ 3, 5	349 student files in electronic spreadsheet	Copied by hand, entered into electronic spreadsheet	Statistical analysis using SPSS	Programme description and cited where appropriate
Qualitative: observation and workshop field notes	-To understand org. culture -To support writing data -RQ 1, 2, 3, 4	Field notes, typed from written	-Observation -Facilitation of writing workshops	-Integrated into writing analysis -Coded using conceptual clusters	Programme description and cited when significant to analysis
Qualitative: student writing data	-RQ 1, 2, 3, 4	-88 pieces of student writing -Field notes, typed from written	Facilitation of writing workshops	Rich feature analysis	Analytic writing in Chapters 5 through 7

Figure 11: Data collection and analysis by type

4.5.1 Quantitative Data Analysis

In Section 4.3.1 I explained my need for basic programmatic information about Hudson Link and the men it has served over the twelve years of its operation. Using the raw data I collected according to the methods described in Section 4.3.2, I analysed the quantitative dataset across a variety of factors. I provided Hudson Link with copies of both

the dataset and the analysis. I also compiled an accurate graduation roster, which they used to correct the information available on their website and promotional materials regarding how many degrees had been awarded. I drew upon the quantitative data periodically throughout my analysis; for example, discussions of recidivism are informed largely by the analysis of student outcomes that I performed. At various points in this thesis I have included my exact results in order to provide adequate context for the reader, and have indicated that these were my own findings. However, the results of my quantitative analyses were not my main interest in this investigation and thus did not warrant their own chapter. For a full description and discussion of my quantitative analysis, please see Appendix D. A collection of relevant results can be found in Appendix E.

4.5.2 Qualitative Data Analysis: Writing as Data

This section defines my analytic treatment of the qualitative data generated through the facilitation of the writing workshops. As argued in Chapter 3, the nature of text lends itself easily to the study of sociocultural contexts, because discourse such as written narrative is the result of semiotic processes and influences inherent to the environment in which it is produced (D'Arcy, 1989; Bazerman, 2004a, 2004b; Barton, 2004; Eubanks, 2004).

Analysing discourse, as my study aims to do, “provides a means of examining communicative practice so as to uncover signs of social identities, institutions, and norms as well as the means by which these social formations are established, negotiated, enacted, and changed through communicative practice” (Bazerman & Prior, 2004: 3). The analyst is charged, then, with the task of identifying the author’s communicative desires and while recognising and sorting out the chorus of voices present in everyday discourse (Bakhtin, 1973). Furthermore, texts reflect not only the culture in which they were produced, but also the *other texts* of that setting – a relationship that discourse and narrative analysts refer to as intertextuality (Kristeva, 1980). Acknowledging such discursal multiplicity was a priority for the analysis.

I deliberately designed a research activity that would elicit multiple texts from each writer in the sample, since earlier studies indicate that singular pieces of text are not

sufficient to understand the identity(ies) of an author or the culture in which his text was produced (Grumet, 1988; Pinar, 1988; Burgess & Ivanic, 2010). Similarly, I analysed each student's entire workshop corpus, rather than prioritising one particular text (such as the final educational memoir) as a definitive statement of their identity or experience. Nor did I isolate singular sections across all individual texts; for example, I did not segment and analyse only the conclusion paragraphs in order to determine participants' beliefs about the imagined endpoint of their stories. I looked instead at the texts as a whole, considering the full range of multiple meanings with them (Ivanic, 1998).

My treatment of the writing data was based on the strategy that Barton (2004: 66) calls "rich feature analysis", a process with enormous value to sociocultural inquiry as it is used to determine the relationship between the linguistic content and contextual purpose of a text's discursal features. Barton (2004: 59-60) calls this relationship a "convention of language", which can reveal both the individual narrator's intentions for meaning as well as the culturally determined or influenced features of his language use. Rich feature analysis focuses on the identification of content in which one can see the connection between a structural linguistic feature – which may be as small as a word or phrase or as large as an underlying theme or motif – and the meaning this feature is meant to convey given its significance in context. Rather than decide in advance if these rich features will be found in the form of phrases, whole sentences, genres, or some other dimension, a first stage of "bottom-up discourse analysis" inductively identifies the textual format of these features and attempts to determine their contextual value.

A second stage in rich feature analysis links the results of the bottom-up discourse analysis to "larger social, political, and cultural frameworks" (2004: 67), essentially creating a conceptual map of rich features. This stage of the process required me to use the codes generated in the initial round of analysis to locate the conceptual literature that would help make sense of the meanings embedded in the data. In Sections 4.5.3 through 4.5.5 I will explain the bottom-up portion of the analysis procedures, and then proceed to a discussion of the more conceptual, top-down work in Section 4.5.6.

4.5.3 Qualitative Analysis Phase 1: Sorting and coding field notes

The first stage in my analysis was to process the qualitative data contained within my field notes. This step had to precede analysis of the written texts because my field notes contained data that could more accurately guide my understanding of how those texts came into being. My notes for passive observations and those for active workshop discussions and conferences were taken and transcribed in chronological order using the same process, and in fact were mixed together in my records. Yet these two sources of data served different purposes and now had to be separated before they could be analysed. Going through the transcripts, I coded the field notes using the categories and sub-categories found in Figure 12. These codes were deliberately designed to be general, as the analysis was in its initial stages and I was not yet searching for meaning in the data.

Code	Example
Category 1: Observation (data from events and talk that I was a witness to, but not a participant in)	<i>One of the men told the story of the fundraiser's inspiration. He recounted a story he had read in the newspaper about a woman who had to drop out of college because she was paralysed in a drive-by shooting. Her insurance would not cover the cost of an aide to assist with the physical aspects of schoolwork, e.g. using the computer, library, etc. He shared the story with a few of his classmates and they "got to thinking" that while none of them had personally shot her, they had "contributed to the kind of society where things like that happen".</i>
Category 2: Conversation (non-workshop)	<i>While I was copying student files today, Cyrus was typing up call-outs and started telling me about one of his favourite books, "A Mind at a Time" by Mel Levine, which he believed I would like because of my interest in education. Asked me what my favourite books were</i>

		<i>and I told him I would make him a list. In general, he seems a lot more interested in talking now that he knows I'm not going to ask him to do my work for me.</i>
Workshop Data Category 3	Conversations/discussions about writing or writing workshop material	<i>Ⓐ: Okay so let's jump right in here. Did you guys get to the reading? (General enthusiastic nods around the room.) What did you think? Ⓚ: Out of everything you give us to read, this stuff was my favourite. "Repeat After Me", and "Motherlove", yeah these were my favourite.</i>
Workshop Data Category 4	Conversations about or related to workshop (general, non-writing)	<i>Explained that I was late to class because I got stuck behind a tour group being checked in at the front gate, and Paul laughed, "Who would spend their time going on a tour of this place?"</i>
Workshop Data Category 5	Non-discoursal workshop data	<i>Officer Rodríguez told me to go through the count room and around to the van, and the officer at the front gate rear door let me walk down to the van by myself. So when I got to the school building I did what Sean always does - rang the bell and waited for an officer to come open the door - and then went up to the second floor and showed the officers my ID. They didn't make me sign in today.</i>

Figure 12: Initial coding of field notes

Once the field notes were coded according to this process, I separated the workshop data from the observational data. Observational data from Categories 1 and 2 were set aside until after I had analysed the writing data, as I wanted the student writing to be my primary guide to the sociocultural context as a whole. The eventual use of these data will be explained in Section 4.5.6. Categories 3, 4, and 5 were taken into Analysis Phase 2, described next.

4.5.4 Qualitative Analysis Phase 2: Analytic worksheets and coding

Next, I began the systematic analysis required to draw and verify interpretations of the various data sources. I scanned and uploaded electronic copies of the 88 writing workshop essays, as well as the versions of these texts that included my handwritten corrections. My first step in this phase was to re-read the entire body of data, one essay at a time, filling out for each piece of writing an analytic tool I adapted from Miles & Huberman's (1994: 51-53) contact summary sheet. Figure 13 displays the blank version of these analytical worksheets, which were designed to help me think critically about the generation and content of each piece. For a sample of a completed worksheet, please see Appendix F.

Name of writer
Prompt title (e.g. First Day of School)
What is the story "about"? 1-2 sentence plot summary.
When in the author's life does this story take place?
What does the narrator explicitly reveal about himself?
What are the themes of this piece?
What are the key images?
What role does education play/how is education represented in this piece?
What were my main written comments about this piece?
In what way might these comments have affected second/third drafts and/or later pieces? And/Or...In what way might this piece have been affected by earlier comments?

Figure 13: Blank analysis worksheet

Other than the actual student writing itself, I drew on data from Categories 3 (conversations/discussions about writing and writing workshop material), 4 (conversations about workshop – general, non-writing related), and 5 (non-discoursal workshop data) in Figure 12 to help me fill in the worksheets in the most thorough way possible. Discussion about individual pieces (Category 3), or discussions with individual authors that were not

directly related to a specific piece of writing (Category 4), were consulted and included in the appropriate space of the analytic worksheet. This process was similar to the way Ivanic (1998) integrated student-written essays, interviews with the authors of those essays, personal knowledge of the authors, and background knowledge about higher education in Britain during the analysis phase of her inquiry into identity construction in academic writing.

To understand specifically how I used writing data in conjunction with observational data and field notes to assist in the coding, consider the following example. In the first draft of Kieran's final memoir he described a former bunkmate as "antisocial". Knowing from my observational data about the psychology background that Hudson Link students receive as part of their Behavioural Science coursework, I underlined the word "antisocial" and wrote a margin note asking him to clarify whether he was referring to the mental health condition known as Antisocial Personality Disorder, classified as a disorder by Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV-TR) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000: 645-650). He never submitted another draft of this piece, but a conversation I recorded in my field notes erased all doubt as to his choice of the word: when I handed the pieces back, Kieran had looked over my comments and remarked to me, "I *was* talking about Antisocial Personality Disorder. How do you know about that? Have you studied psychology too?" I would not have been comfortable coding this description of his "antisocial" bunkie as an example of his using behavioural science to make sense of experience had my observational data not been available as support.

Just as I aimed to understand the effects of context on the men's sensemaking processes, I needed to attend to the effects of the workshop on the writing they produced. Filling out the analysis worksheets and using my field notes to reconstruct each bit of data was also useful in that it allowed me to see where in their writing the men were responding directly to me in some way. An example of this was a line from Graham's final memoir. In an earlier assignment, Graham had written, as a rhetorical question to the reader, "How ironic is that?" in reference to something that I did not believe was an example of irony. I painstakingly read up on all the possible correct usages of the word "ironic", and when I was sure that he had misused the word, I wrote a paragraph in his feedback form telling him so

and explaining my reasoning. In his final memoir, Graham included the following line: “Sometimes I misuse the term ironic, but damn if that ain’t at least coincidental.” Examined in the broad context of the writing workshop as a whole, the construction of this line was clearly a direct dialogic response to a previous interaction between him and me (Smith & Sparkes, 2008). Using the analysis worksheet system allowed me to reconstruct the path to that piece of data and its nuances.

While filling out these worksheets, I simultaneously generated a list of thematic categories emerging from the questions, “What are the themes of this piece?” and “What role does education play/how is education represented in this piece?” and wrote them down on Post-it notes. Generating categories this way is the approach of “a more inductive researcher [who] may not want to precode any datum until he or she has collected it, seen how it functions or nests in its context, and determined how many varieties of it there are...the analyst is more open-minded and more context-sensitive” (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 58). The emphasis on context, and on locating participant meanings rather than fitting their meanings into my own preconceived categories, linked my analytic processes to the sociocultural framework of the inquiry.

As they were generated I aligned the Post-it notes horizontally across the top of a giant piece of easel paper affixed to my workroom wall. I used easel paper instead of a notebook or word processing file because of the visual and spatial awareness of my data that such size and proximity would facilitate. I chose Post-it notes rather than writing directly on the easel paper because I wanted to be able to manipulate, physically and visually, the analytic categories until they were arranged in a configuration that stood up to the testing of my interpretations. I knew that my first understanding of what a bit of data meant could change later in the process, and I wanted to be able to discard my old categorisation quickly and easily. I was also not yet ready to determine the relationship of the categories to each other, and using manipulatives like Post-it notes allowed me to test different interpretations without having to commit to them.

I completed an analytic worksheet for every essay in the database and created a horizontal axis of blue Post-it notes containing the twenty thematic categories that had

emerged. Next, I went back through the 88 pieces and coded each individually, looking for the exact bits of data that fit into the categories on the horizontal axis. If I still agreed with my first interpretation, I created a purple Post-It note with the name of the author and a reference point (essay and page number), and then put it on a vertical axis underneath the category heading. In this way I was able to see the size of the categories, to get a sense of how prevalent they were and how they compared to each other. I also compiled the relevant data, along with the name of the author and the reference point, into a word processing document for each category so as to keep complete records of each one. The entire body of 88 pieces of writing was coded according to this method, until I had twenty word processing documents and a complete matrix of Post-it notes (Figure 14).

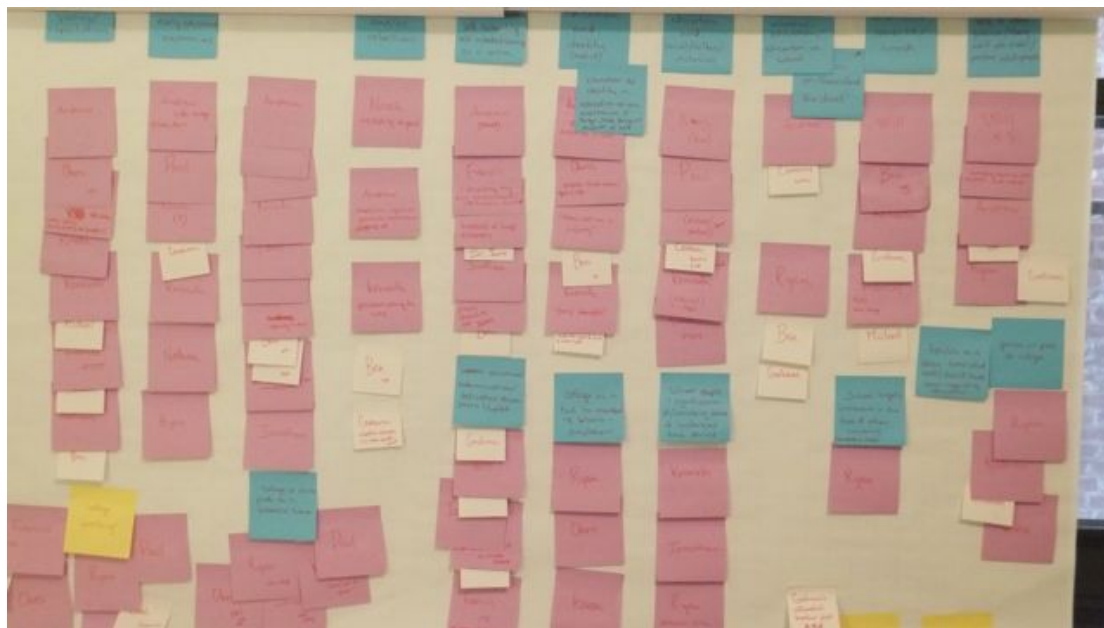


Figure 14: Post-it analysis matrix

4.5.5 Qualitative Analysis Phase 3: Testing and refining interpretations

After coding the student writing with support from my observational data and field notes, I critically examined the categories with respect to my research questions. For example, “College as a tool for understanding behaviour” held up as a category that could help me understand how students used higher education to make sense of experience. On the other hand, writing that fit into the category “School and social life/friends” was prevalent,

but did not add anything unique to the understanding of my data; surely anyone, in this context or another, would mention his childhood friends and classmates when asked about early educational experiences. “Trauma of early educational experiences” was another category containing almost every writer in the group, which instantly made me suspicious of its usefulness; upon re-examining the evidence in this category, I found that it could all be re-coded under more specific, accurate headings.

In other cases, I merged multiple categories into single ones where I saw that two of my interpretations were actually halves of a larger concept. As one example, I did this with the categories “Prison as a ‘detour’ to what could/should have been” and “Prison as a path to college”; although a distinct number of writers had actually used the word “detour”, the data were still dealing mainly with the connections between the past, the present, and prison. Categories rendered obsolete in the testing and refining process were removed from the data matrix and filed, with the pieces of data reassigned or discarded as necessary.

4.5.6 Qualitative Analysis Phase 4: Linking data to theory

Approaching the top-down stage of rich feature analysis (Barton, 2004: 67) required that I now step back from the data and build the conceptual framework that would allow me to turn these interpretations into coherent findings. This advanced the inquiry from the general sociocultural stance that individual development must be examined within its context to the more specific examination of how asking students to write revealed their processes of sensemaking and identity construction – and how the prison college might be seen as a figured world (Holland *et al.*, 1998) by whose norms they were guided.

During bottom-up analysis I had moved from raw data to inductively generated codes. In the stage of top-down analysis I progressed from inductive codes to established theoretical constructs and then proceeded to clustering (Miles & Huberman, 1994: 248-250), in which the codes were sorted according to the broader yet more focused conceptual framework. In this case I sorted the individual codes into the very general groupings of “Past”, “Present”, and “Future”. Once these clusters were assembled, I was able to examine each in turn and revise the headings to more accurately reflect their contents. The three clusters identified in

this stage are represented by Chapter 5, “Making Sense of Life Before College”, Chapter 6, “The Tools of Identity Reconstruction”, and Chapter 7, “Approaching the Future”. The details of my top-down analysis can be seen in Figure 15.

Cluster (Orig. heading)	Concepts (from theory)	Codes	Analysis Chapter (Revised heading)	RQ
Past	Narrative as a pattern of cognition; history-in-person; experience; sensemaking; figured worlds; behavioural science as a way of knowing	Adult role models; informal/street education; behavioural science explanations; prison as a path to college; role of family in education	Making Sense of Life Before College	1, 2, 4
Present	Prison college as figured world; identity; transformation narratives; agency; language as an agency/identity tool; writing as a performance of identity	Education and identity; personal change; self-teaching; college writing	The Tools of Identity Reconstruction	1, 2, 4
Future	Envisioned trajectory; agency; bootstrapping	College as obvious path to successful future; imagining the future	Approaching the Future	1, 3, 5

Figure 15: Linking data to theory

Qualitative observation data from Categories 1 and 2 in Figure 12 were also coded using the past/present/future clusters, and are included in the analysis chapters when they can serve to illuminate a particular semiotic phenomenon. By providing both the verbatim writing data themselves as well as the necessary contextual knowledge for readers to find their way to my own interpretation and conclusions, I attempted to satisfy the requirements laid out by Peshkin (1985: 280), who wrote:

When I disclose what I have seen, my results invite other researchers to look where I did and see what I saw. My ideas are candidates for others to entertain, not necessarily as truth, let alone Truth, but as positions about the nature and meaning of a phenomenon that may fit their sensibility and shape their thinking about their own inquiries.

4.6 Ethical Considerations

The sensitive and potentially volatile environment of the fieldwork in this study meant that the relevant ethical issues had to be considered before any design or methodological choices could be made. As with any research undertaking, there were questions about how best to build a relationship with participants that allowed for honest and open dialogue while minimising, as much as possible, any potentially negative repercussions of their involvement. In this case, however, the prison context greatly complicated the process of understanding how best to proceed with this, and brought the issues of researcher and participant safety very much to the foreground.

4.6.1 Participant Vulnerability

Prison inmates are an undoubtedly vulnerable population, in that they do not have the choice to stand up and leave the physical space of the inquiry. However, these were students taking part in a voluntary education programme, participation in which required intellectual rigor, personal discipline, and competent navigation of both prison and school administrations. My sample was drawn from members of a total institution with relatively limited autonomy, but also from a group of adults who by all appearances were typically developing and educationally successful. I did not believe that they were a great deal more vulnerable to exploitation than any other group of adult learners.

Nonetheless, I treated the potential risks to research participants with utmost respect and tried as best I could to anticipate and mitigate the possible effects of their participation. Prison conditions and regulations are designed to take a physical, emotional, and psychological toll on those inside. Under such conditions, added stress from participation in research would be most unwelcome, so I took precautions in order to limit the potentially distressing effects of the inquiry. These precautions were related specifically to three primary

areas: limited access to civilian women; anonymity and confidentiality; and time commitment.

4.6.2 Limited Access to Civilian Women

The first prison-specific ethical concern that I had going into this research was the way in which my gender might affect the course and results of the inquiry. Sing Sing is an all-male institution and though there are female corrections officers, I knew I would be one of very few women in the school building at any given time. In absolutely no way did I expect the men enrolled in Hudson Link to resemble the stereotypically sex-starved, hyper-masculine convict personas one finds in television dramas. Nonetheless, the methodological literature indicates that in absence of monetary or other concrete incentive to participate in research, inmates often volunteer simply because it is nice to have someone to talk to (Noakes & Wincup 2004; Bosworth *et al.* 2005; Schlosser, 2008). What concerned me most was the possible exploitation of prison inmates' desire to spend time with a young, female, civilian outsider. Hammersley & Atkinson (2007: 74) made the particularly chilling observation that "the 'hustling' informant who is trying to impress the researcher may prove particularly forthcoming to her; males may be manipulated by femininity. Similarly, in so far as women are seen as unthreatening, they may gain access to settings and information with relative ease." I genuinely wanted to avoid "capitalizing on gender roles" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007: 75) and did not wish to take advantage, even inadvertently, of the absence of civilian women at the facility. But there was the unavoidable possibility of drawing participants who primarily desired interaction with of an attentive young woman, especially one who actively wanted to hear their story.

I did not feel at the end of my fieldwork period that I could have manipulated anyone into joining the group. I know in hindsight that students joined my workshops mostly because they were specifically asked to do so by the college administrator, or because they loved to write and requested a place on the course before having met me. In fact I had no more than two interactions with any one student in which we discussed the possibility of his workshop participation. Of course I was seen by a great number of people while collecting

quantitative data before the workshops began, and I simply cannot say if that affected anyone's decision to join.

4.6.3 Informed Consent

Informed consent was an extremely important part of the ethical considerations in this inquiry, owing in part to the vulnerability of the population. Additionally, the anonymity and confidentiality guidelines that serve as standard practice in most social science research had to be modified for use in the prison setting. While it was important to me to build trust with participants, there were some legal obstacles to the full promises of anonymity and confidentiality that I might have liked to offer. The exact limits to these agreements had to be determined and explained accordingly so that participants could give their informed consent before sharing anything with me.

The informed consent materials indicated that while the Hudson Link programme would be named in my thesis, individual anonymity of authors would be granted through the use of pseudonyms and by removing as much identifying information as necessary from the written accounts. They also covered my agreement with the college programme ensuring that nothing said to me in the course of the workshop could be used against a participant to affect his academic status or standing. Finally they provided the contact information of my academic supervisor in the Education Department, should any such member of the workshop have need to contact him regarding my activities with the group. These documents were approved by the Central University Research Ethics Committee and may be found in full in Appendix G.

In accordance with the methodological literature (Newman, 1958; King, 2000; Schlosser, 2008) I made it clear to participants, both verbally and in writing, that I had an obligation to report the identity of any participant who disclosed information regarding planned escape, planned harm to others, or planned harm to himself. I also explained that my confidentiality agreements were with them only – in the event that the prison authorities should ask to see their writing, or that I or my notes should be subpoenaed, I had no legal recourse to withhold their identities or any information they had shared with me. The rule of

thumb that I gave them was that while they were welcome to write about or tell me anything they liked, I would never ask about criminal activities, and that it would be unwise to reveal any information to me that was not already known to law enforcement and prison authorities.

4.6.4 Research fatigue

Finally I would say that the greatest challenge of the chosen methodology was by far the toll it took on me personally. Anticipating the taxing nature of the work, my safety was considered in advance, and standard measures were taken to ensure my security. My principal supervisor conducted a risk assessment as part of the CUREC procedures, speaking by phone to Hudson Link Executive Director Sean Pica to check the fieldwork arrangements and the safety procedures that would be in place for me. I was briefed ahead of time on whom to consult in the case of any concerns, as well as all emergency procedures. At the research site, two uniformed officers were in the hallway outside our classroom at all times. My physical safety was less at issue than my emotional wellbeing.

Methodological literature set up the expectation that prison work would be physically and emotionally difficult, yet I was still surprised by how demanding the fieldwork turned out to be. During my workshop weeks I was spending two afternoons a week inside the prison, teaching one day and collecting data the other. On the days in between, I was preparing lessons and reviewing the men's assignments for the workshop, as well as entering my handwritten data into an electronic database. For every three hours I spent inside the prison, there was an additional four hours of travel, preparation, security checks, and waiting for guards to escort me around the prison, plus easily two hours or more of writing field notes. The research fatigue from both the demanding schedule and the physically, emotionally, and psychically oppressive environment of the prison was immense, much greater than I could have anticipated, and slowed my overall progress considerably. I am not sure, in retrospect, that there was any way this could have been avoided, and in fact the methodological literature had prepared me to expect it (King, 2000). My criminology supervisor was an immensely helpful resource in learning to deal with the stresses of prison fieldwork, and striking a balance between ethnography and sanity.

Despite the challenges that the fieldwork presented, my understanding of life ‘inside’ was in fact greatly augmented by the stresses I felt in the process of the inquiry. As Lee-Treweek (2000: 114) observed in her discussion of emotional danger in social research, “When we begin to question the reasons we felt welcomed, distanced or angry and how this response compared to the way we expected to feel, a greater degree of understanding of how others experience the setting often emerges.” Had I been working with a team, dividing the work over a greater number of people and thus needing to spend less time inside, I do not believe I would have fully grasped the complexities and atmosphere of the research environment. Had I left the field feeling that prison was ‘not that bad’ or that I was somehow energised or uplifted from the experience of being there, this would not indicate true understanding in any sense.

4.7 Closing Remarks: Reporting

The final stage of my methodological considerations lay in deciding how best to represent my findings and interpretations. I needed to present a convincing argument for my conclusions and how I came to them, while simultaneously recognising that another analyst might look at my data and come away with a very different understanding. In order to do this I aimed to construct interpretive categories that stood up to the conceptual frameworks I laid out in Chapter 3, and that maintained a high level of internal validity (Punch, 1998: 85). In the presentation of each category, cross-case examples are considered, pulling together data from a variety of participants and showing how these contribute to the formation of the category and my conceptualisation of it. Weighing various data against each other also serves to test and demonstrate the strength of the conceptual categories, as well as to expand the full range of meaning within them.

I should mention, finally, that the analysis contained in the chapters that follow is limited in some ways. As I mentioned earlier, I only knew and worked with the men in the context of their activities as college students. I did not see them in their roles as son, father, or husband except in the narratives they constructed for the workshop. With the exception of four or five students I did run into on their housing block during my tour of Sing Sing, I did

not have a chance to see many of them solely as members of the prison at large. Additionally, there are factors that no doubt play a role in the men's ideas of who they are: race, socioeconomic class, masculinity, perhaps even the type of crime for which they were locked up.

These components of identity are not discussed not because I don't see their importance, but rather because I was limited in the amount of data I could collect and because I aimed to analyse only what the men told me rather than my speculations about them. Many of the stories highlighted in Chapters 5 through 7 mention that the writers grew up in poverty but in fact several do not. Some of the men were ethnic or racial minorities, but some were not. Only five members of the sample said they were from New York, while the other ten hailed from other states and even other countries. Rather than try to get 'the real story' on their backgrounds so that I could verify or validate my findings using dimensions of race, class, and gender, I acknowledge that the limited amount of space in this thesis does not allow me to include those factors in my analysis. Instead, I use what the men told me about themselves, 'true' or not, to learn what I can about the Hudson Link context and its effects on meaning making among its members. With that, I turn now to the data.

Chapter 5: Making Sense of Life Before College

It was yesterday, very long ago.

-Paul

As discussed in Chapter 3, sociocultural inquiry aims to discover the influences of the settings in which human beings interpret their experiences. Humans create meaning, according to this standpoint, through a process of semiotic mediation guided by contextual norms. Accordingly, Holland *et al.*'s (1998) concept of the *figured world* became a useful construct in analysing the sensemaking processes of Hudson Link students in a way that acknowledged the complex factors at work in such a setting. Approaching the prison college programme as a figured world provides a framework for identifying the meaning and importance assigned to certain actions and behaviours, as well as the processes by which members of this world make sense of their experiences.

Chapter 3 also dealt with the ways that human beings undertake such sensemaking through the use of narrative, both in their own understanding and in the communication of those meanings to others. Narrative theory tells us that personal historical understandings are both temporal and episodic, occurring one at a time and in a particular chronological order (Polkinghorne, 1998: 11). Additionally, these stories are by their very nature shaped by the norms and values of the context in which we learn to tell them (Dewey, 1938; Holland *et al.*, 1998: 60). As such, the student narratives elicited through the writing workshops described in Chapter 4 reveal a number of the semiotic resources offered within the figured world of the prison college. Analysis and discussion of these resources make up the substance of Chapters 5 through 7.

Textual analysis of the narratives' rich features – those features that, as described in Chapter 4, “point to the relation between a text and its context” (Barton, 2004: 66) – provides insight into the way that Hudson Link students are guided in the process of mediation. That analysis indicates that they first re-interpret their past experiences through a new set of cultural values, and then construct a narrative that helps them make sense of their current

situations so they can move forward with their lives. As in Cain's (1991) investigation of the personal story in Alcoholics Anonymous, my inquiry uses narratives generated in the course of this sensemaking process to examine the semiotic resources and tools available in the prison college context. The data in this chapter have to do with the ways students appropriate Hudson Link's contextual tools in order to engage with their individual histories-in-person – "the sediment of past experiences upon which one improvises, using the cultural resources available, in response to the subject positions afforded one in the present" (Holland *et al.*, 1998: 18). The writing highlighted in Chapter 5 points to students' understandings of their own past experiences as well as begins to explore what those available cultural resources might be.

Formal schooling, especially its early years, calls childhood memories to mind, so it was no surprise that students wrote about their families while writing about education. Section 5.1 of this chapter explores the writers' descriptions of their families' attitudes towards education, which may illustrate reasons some of the men were initially drawn to the idea of education in prison. In writing about their early memories of education, many of them also recalled lessons learned outside the context of formal schooling. Section 5.2 of this chapter explores narratives about learning that took place in what students frequently called "the street". Section 5.3 deals with the focus within the figured world of the prison college on behavioural science as a way of understanding one's experiences and interactions with others. A very common theme – the influence of family members and other adult role models (or lack thereof) on the writers' upbringings and outcomes – is explored in Section 5.4. The chapter closes with Section 5.5, showcasing data that draw an unequivocal connection between going to prison and going to college. Collectively, the data in these sections will show how Hudson Link students learn to make sense of their pasts using some of the cultural resources available to them in the present.

5.1 Family Values and Expectations

My first assignments for the writing workshop students, “First Day of School” and “Learning to Read”, evoked for many their childhood experiences of education. Ten of the fifteen stories touched on students’ memories of their families and on the academic expectations and values their parents fostered in them as children and young men. Sometimes these examples were offered as evidence of success in early efforts, while others showed the opposite effect – unrealistically high parental expectations leading to discouragement and eventual rebellion. In either event the influence of family attitudes about education in the figured worlds of men’s childhoods remained a popular topic for exploration through writing.

All of the students who wrote about their family’s views of education reported messages about the importance of going to college. Even those men whose families did not encourage them to pursue higher education reportedly did so due to a low opinion of their intellectual abilities, rather than perceived insignificance of the pursuit. There is a sense from the writing that in pursuing college today, many of the workshop students are returning to something that was important to them as members not just of the Hudson Link programme, but of their own families as well. In analysing these textual examples we can observe the ways that students thought about pursuing higher education specifically as a path to ‘making up for’ their past misdeeds in a way their families would appreciate and value.

Several students explained that their parents wanted more for them than they’d had for themselves, and used excited, positive talk to show how this could be attained through the pursuit of education. Ben, who wrote that he was bright from an early age, was encouraged by his family to do what none of them had yet been able to achieve.

As a young sponge, the idea of me attending college was often impressed upon me. My relatives regularly spilled statements about my destiny with college, which I naturally absorbed. For instance, my father’s mother, in her inspirational moments, would assure me time and again, “baby, you’ll be the first male member of this family to attend college.” When I brought good report cards home from public school, my mother’s mother would regularly suggest, “you’re gonna go to college and get grades like this too.” After persuasive arguments with my mother’s sister to stay outside a little longer to participate in those common childhood activities such as sleepovers or attending the movies with neighborhood friends, she would always remind me, “after you finish college, you’re gonna be my lawyer.”

(Ben, Why College)

Ben's family spoke enthusiastically about his "destiny with college," boasting long in advance of his future accomplishments. We will see later how Ben credits his turn from school to the streets to some of these very family members, who in other scenes engage in criminal behaviour right in front of him. But Ben saw that these adults, at least at one point, hoped that he would be able to achieve something greater for himself, and that he would do it by getting an education.

Noah had similar memories of the importance placed on education by his parents from an early age. He wrote about his first day of kindergarten at a private Catholic school, of which he was initially apprehensive because he wanted to attend the school where his mother was a teacher.

"You're going to enjoy your school. It's better than the one I teach in," [my mother] assured me. "We paid big bucks because you're special."

(Noah, Final Memoir)

Even though Noah hated his new school and feared the nuns that taught him, he still understood that it was special, and that he had to take it seriously, because his parents had saved money in order to send him there. The implication, as in Ben's account, was that his parents wanted more for him than they had for themselves, Noah's mother pushing for something even better than the school where she herself was a teacher.

Kenneth's parents also put stock in the value of a good education for their children, in their case seeing these efforts as part of a larger historical movement for racial equality. In 1964, Kenneth's parents sent him to attend second grade at a newly integrated school where he and his brothers were the only black students. To say that Kenneth hated the white school would be an understatement, even though his three best friends, all white, and his brothers were there with him. He explained:

When history was taught I was always made to feel ashamed of myself because my race was always viewed as the misfortunate ones. Civil Rights movements were in full effect and the whole country was in an uproar, and somehow my white teachers

always made me feel as though it was my fault. Some of the kids were real cruel and mean to me.

(Kenneth, First Day of School)

Despite his protests, Kenneth's parents chose to continue sending their sons to the all-white school, "where [they] would receive a better education," driving across town every morning to get them there. Sitting his boys down one day during a trip to the park, Kenneth's father explained further what it meant to be able to send them to the white school.

...I remember him saying to us that he knows that we don't like the school that we are going to, but he also said to us; that our race of people are going through a period in time where we have to make a stand and make our voices heard, that me and my brothers have to be strong and be men and stand up for what is right and never back down, to stick together at all times. That all three of us are pioneers paving the way for the future of our people.

(Kenneth, First Day of School)

Kenneth's father encouraged them to be resilient and "never back down" because he saw their ability to attend a school good enough for white children as an important part of the fight for civil rights. Both the plight of a better education and the social importance of being "pioneers" in the public school context were highly valued by Kenneth's parents. His father believed that from his family's struggle to be those educational "pioneers", future generations of African Americans would see fairer treatment and better opportunities than he had seen in his own lifetime.

Those students whose early memories of education were negative still said that their parents placed a high premium on academic success. Several could relate to what Andrew expressed in his final memoir, when he wrote about the way his parents' expectations for his school performance were so high that they became a cause of tension and stress. The first draft of his final memoir focused on his father's attempt to motivate him using fear and derision – a tactic that eventually drove an irreparable wedge between them. Describing a meeting during which his junior high school teacher tells his parents that the B and C grades on his report card eliminate him from the running for class valedictorian, Andrew wrote:

My mom released a quiet sigh and placed her hand on her forehead. My dad's brow slowly wrinkled and his tan complexion had turned to crimson. He caught my stare and returned it with a glare...

...I was tired. I was tired of my Dad's verbal harassment every time I showed him a test paper: "You got a 98?! What about the other two points?! You're supposed to get a 100?! You're not studying hard enough. Do you want to become a stupid bum and live on the street when you get older?! I expect a 100 on all of your tests!"

I was also tired of the constant comparisons between me and other children, classmate or cousin: "I heard that your classmate, Francis, got the highest score on the last science test. What's the matter with you?! Why did you let him get the highest score?! You're supposed to beat him! You're supposed to beat all of them! You're going to be a loser in life! Do you want to be a loser?!"

For eight grueling years I had to deal with this torment, feeling like a small leaf caught in a hurricane of belittlement and ridicule...

(Andrew, Final Memoir)

Andrew's father must have hoped to spur him to academic success this way, but the value of education was lost on Andrew as his feelings of resentment and anger grew stronger and he looked elsewhere for encouragement and support. The constant feeling that he was disappointing his parents by failing to reach academic perfection eventually caused him to turn away from school as a possible arena for success. Several other students wrote in similar ways about the disheartening effects of their parents' disappointment in them when they failed to achieve academically. At the heart of all these accounts is the idea that education was highly valued within the figured worlds of their childhoods.

The importance that many Hudson Link students' parents placed on education when they were children and adolescents may explain the common theme in the data of pursuing a college degree at least in part to make one's parents proud. Despite showing his father putting an unreasonable amount of pressure on him and his siblings to succeed academically, Michael still said that wanting to please his parents was one of his main reasons for pursuing a college degree after his arrest:

...[My parents'] concern about my case made me feel guilty and helped me focus more on attaining as many program certificates, diplomas, and education in general I could take in order to show them I was doing something positive with my life, and to

lessen their worries and suffering for me... I started college in prison because I like studying. I want to better myself and become a college graduate and having a professional career. I have always wanted it. However, deep within myself I know I also do it because I want to give that happiness to my parents. I want them to feel proud of me. In some way I feel that would help me repay for all the suffering I have put them through.

(Michael, Final Memoir)

Michael's pursuit of education stemmed both from a message he received during early childhood about the intrinsic value of getting an education, as well as the idea that it was something he could still do to make his parents happy, even from prison. He felt that showing his parents he was "doing something positive with [his] life" could "repay" some small part of the pain he had caused with his arrest and sentencing. This was a common theme across the sample.

The language here and in the writing of several other students indicates that education was widely recognised among these students as a positive endeavour that could make their parents proud of them, and that could open doors of personal and professional success. It is likely that these students pursued education in prison specifically *because* it was so valued in their upbringing, which nurtured a predisposition towards opportunities for advancement through schooling. This information serves as a significant backdrop for the rest of the study's findings. However, these stories are, in effect, current re-castings of past events, containing meanings and interpretations of experience that may not exactly mirror those lived at the time. In keeping with the conceptual framework of the study, these re-castings can point to values of the figured world in which students constructed these recollections.

In fact, according to observational data, the figured world of Hudson Link validates the message that education may help repair damaged family connections and esteem. That theme could be clearly heard in the speech given by the valedictorian of the Hudson Link Class of 2009, at a ceremony attended by almost all of the men in my writing workshops. The speech, which took the shape of a life history narrative, led the audience through the speaker's 23 years in prison, starting with his crime and ending with his redemption through education. With tears in his eyes, he said, "I wish I could somehow erase from the life of my mother the memories of the pain and shame I caused her. Mom, I have given you numerous

reasons to be ashamed of me. Today I give you reason to be proud. You see, you did do a good job with me: it just took a while to show.” If students are pursuing education because they feel, as the data in this section suggest they do, that academic success could help redeem them in the eyes of their families, the norms of the figured world clearly support and reinforce the idea that redemption is possible through education.

5.2 Informal/Street Education

Despite the message that many of these students reported about the importance of a good education, several of the men in the writing workshop wrote about leaving school at a young age. Six of their stories then go on to describe the informal or “street” education that took the place of traditional schooling. Four students in particular chose remarkably similar language to recall this learning using vocabulary specific to the field of formal education and schooling. Two such examples demonstrate that men enrolled in Hudson Link make sense of their ineffective previous attempts at formal education while finding validation and success among others with similar early experiences.

One such account was found in Andrew’s writing. After explaining his decision to drop out of high school, he wrote:

*My **education** would now come from personal experiences alone. My **classroom** would be my surroundings, my environment. My **teachers** would be anyone whose life path randomly crossed mine. My **classmates** would be my friend, “S” and the other guys I hung out with. For three short months I gained first-hand **knowledge** of life’s offerings. I experienced the bitter taste of alcohol. I experienced the soft, gentle skin of a woman’s body and the rough painful touch of a man’s fist. I **learned** about brutality from random fights my new **classmates** and I would get into with others. I **learned** about humility while looking straight into the barrel of a gun. This was the best **education** I could get, better than any **prep school or Ivy League college**.*

(Andrew, Final Memoir, emphasis added)

In Andrew’s narrative understanding of his past, his street activity replaced his formal schooling, and he drew a parallel to the lessons he learned there using the vocabulary of formal education, highlighted above in bold, to describe them. Where Andrew’s account of his education strays from the traditional vocabulary of the formal school system is in his

choice of the word “experience”. Andrew’s allusions to the streets with his mention of drinking, fighting, and violence suggest a relationship between informal street education and the practical learning that could only take place outside the type of school that he eschews in this paragraph.

Graham also referred directly to the streets as the location of his education, and like Andrew, he alluded to the more important lessons he learned there when public school could teach him nothing useful. One piece gives an extended description of his early informal learning processes couched in the language and vocabulary of school. Going a step farther than Andrew by actually naming academic subjects he learned in this context, Graham wrote:

*The streets became my **official learning grounds**. They offered a lot of **courses**, **affordable tuition**, and an **entertaining curriculum**. Plus **classes** were anytime any place, so I didn’t have to wake up early or travel across town to get there. I breezed through the **school** of hard knocks, earning props instead of **credits**, a reputation instead of a **degree**, and notoriety instead of **academic fame**. What’s sad is I was still good at Math and Science, but I chose to apply those skills in illegal trades like manufacturing and marketing drugs.*

*In my **freshman semester of Street School**, I **aced Political Science**. I **learned** to say one thing and mean another while keeping a straight face. I also took **Chemistry**, where I **learned** to take one-part cocaine, two-parts baking soda, and a random element like 7-Up or yeast and make crack-cocaine.*

*As a **sophomore** I decided on my **major: Economics**. I **learned** about **supply and demand**, **interest rates**, and **scales of economy**. I applied those **principles** to my pharmaceutical business by making sure supply never equalled demand, which allowed me to charge higher prices for my merchandise. I lent drugs to other dealers at exorbitant interest rates. I also paid lower prices for my inventory by purchasing in bulk.*

*By the time I became a **junior**, I **earned credits** in **Philanthropy**, which **taught** me to do little things like buy ice cream for the neighborhood kids and carry groceries for their parents. By crafting a good image of myself, most residents would warn me when they saw police in the area.*

*I **earned a minor in Geography** and visited street **universities** all over America as an **exchange student**. I **learned** that although residential structures differed and accents varied, the streets were the streets no matter where I went.*

*I also **studied Research and Development**, where I **learned** techniques I used while traveling the country. I explored small towns, **researching** their law enforcement practices and habits. When possible, I developed those towns into viable drug markets by introducing their residents to crack, cocaine and marijuana.*

*In my **senior year** I **transferred to Gladiator School** where violence was the norm. I took **Physics**, where I **learned** to operate, take apart, clean, and eventually dispose of guns. I also **studied Greek Classics**, which **taught** me to war with other*

*gladiators, sometimes to the death. The only rule of engagement was to win, whether through hand to hand combat, greater numbers, or weapons like handguns and explosives. Every victory was a **credit**, and **degrees were earned** when one's authority was no longer challenged. As the leader of my crew I **learned** to manage **Human Resources**...The streets were my **learning grounds**: a rough and tumble environment designed to turn each student into a predator or prey. And I was no exception.*

(Graham, Final Memoir, emphasis added)

From the text emphasised in bold, we can see that Graham's approach to describing his informal "street" education makes use of both the vocabulary and pacing of formal schooling, naming lessons learned as though in academic classes, and progressing from freshman to senior year just as one would in high school. But this narrative, like Andrew's, retrospectively re-figures his experience using language that – as part of a world from which he was removed – would not have been available to Graham at the time.

The informal education that the men recounted in their memoirs was not limited to the streets. For the inspirational teacher assignment, Cameron wrote about a fellow inmate who taught him how to read music. When looked at in context of his other writing, the piece sends a broader message about Cameron's view of education over the course of his lifetime. The piece starts out with an anecdote about teaching himself to play the piano using a keyboard that was so basic it "was little more than a toy".

I had to learn to play it, as opposed to playing with it. I didn't know the terms and jargon for making music, but I knew how to make it. I thought that was enough.

(Cameron, Inspirational Teacher, emphasis original)

Eventually Cameron realised he would have to learn to read music if he wanted to play with other musicians:

Frankly, I had never felt that reading was that important, because I played by ear, and I have an excellent ear. I didn't see what the big deal was. But like every culture, music has a language, and you have to know the language in order to communicate well. You can just make up your own and disregard the common tongue if you want, but you'll be alone, having conversations with yourself.

(Cameron, Inspirational Teacher)

The idea of acquiring knowledge in his own self-determined way, rather than submitting to the same process as those around him, reminded me of a theme found in some of Cameron's earlier writing. The previous week, in his "Why College" essay, Cameron questioned the importance of taking the same steps others had in order to reach a correct answer:

In-class work I did quickly and well, but "show your work"? Why? Besides, often I would have been hard pressed to explain how I'd come to that conclusion that I had, because it wasn't necessarily by the same route that we'd been taught. Wasn't it enough that I'd gotten it right?

(Cameron, Why College)

When we met to plan his final memoir, Cameron was unsure of what direction to go in. When I suggested that he explore the question, "Wasn't it enough that I'd gotten it right?", he confessed that he used to feel the only value of college was that it could influence other people's opinions of him. But he believed the pivotal moment in his education was deciding to pursue a college degree anyway, to show not just that he *could* do it but that he *did* do it. I asked him if he saw the relationship between this idea and his decision to learn to read music so he wouldn't be having a conversation with himself, and he agreed that he did. His final memoir centred on the constant refrain from his early school memories: "Show your work."

More than once, I've heard the phrase, "It doesn't matter how much you know if no one knows you know it." I understood my teachers' logic; I just didn't agree...There are some exceptional children who have an appreciation for the future and long-term consequences, but I wasn't one of 'em. If I'm talking to you right now, and you can clearly see and hear that I'm intelligent, what difference does a "D" on my permanent record make? Oh, how they harped on the "permanent record", but they never actually produced it. It was clearly fictitious, an academic boogeyman fabricated to frighten children far more gullible than I. Of course, now that I have a couple of felonies, I can better recognize just how life-affecting a permanent record really is. And with that recognition came a desire to produce a new record, or at least mitigate the old one, by actually acquiring some of those pieces of paper that our society has collectively agree indicate, "Yeah, this person's at least smart enough to get some letters behind his name."

(Cameron, Final Memoir)

In this passage Cameron came to terms with why he eventually decided to pursue formal education after years of denying its value. His return to the subject of college reminds us that for all the importance the authors in this section placed on their informal education, these stories were written exclusively by students enrolled in a degree-granting undergraduate programme. That transition to college and what it means for their identities is significant and will be discussed in the next chapter. For now the important detail is how the students constructed narratives of informal and “street” education to explain and account for the time they spent outside of traditional academic schooling. Also noteworthy is the way Cameron positioned himself as the omniscient narrator of his own story, evident both in his use of “permanent record” as a metonym and the dramatic irony in his earlier dismissal of its importance. This kind of self-conscious, deliberate construction of discursal self – of self as narrator – will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 6.

The stories students told about their “street” education show how they make sense of their informal learning experiences, recasting them in the language of more traditional educational pathways. They also serve a greater purpose in the overall structure of the narratives, as their descriptions of the illegal activity in which they were learning to participate provide a logical explanation for their current physical whereabouts. Finally, these data demonstrate how members of the prison college are now able to pursue and achieve success in an endeavour at which they previously failed, in part because they do so among others with similar histories-in-person.

5.3 Behavioural Science Explanations

Hudson Link students take a variety of social science classes, including Psychology, Sociology, Criminology, and Family Ethics, among many others. Executive Director Sean Pica is fond of telling people that the Behavioural Science degree is a good fit for the men because so many of them eventually go into social service work after their release, which many of them do. But it is clear from the writing that before they turn their attention outward, Hudson Link students use behavioural science explanations as a resource for understanding themselves. Six of the fifteen writers revealed a behavioural science framework as one of the

tools Hudson Link students can use to re-interpret past circumstances and actions in a way that makes sense of those experiences. The most cursory example of this idea came from Ryan, who wrote of his college coursework, “I found the classes interesting, enjoyed learning new information and even used some of it to analyze my own behavior” (Ryan, Final Memoir).

Noah described a similar experience from the beginning of his college career, but in more detail than Ryan:

Since our major was Behavioral Science...I began questioning my own past behavior and the circumstances of my crime. *What if I would've just put my pride to the side and just ran away when I was attacked? Why couldn't I just leave the hedonistic lifestyle for a normal one? Why am I so selfish?* I devoted as much time to introspection as I did to my courses.

(Noah, Final Memoir)

Noah depicted himself questioning his past actions as well as his present attitude. In the process of this “introspection”, the questions he asked himself attribute his *behaviour* – his word – to pride and selfishness. He was attempting to find psychological explanations for his choices.

In addition to data dealing with analysing and understanding one's own behaviour, students also reported using their Behavioural Science coursework in their interactions with other people. Chris wrote in several of his pieces about wanting to work with at-risk youth upon his release from prison, and reported that he had already started calling upon his coursework in informal counselling situations:

I'm studying human behavior, which has given me profound insight into the characters of others. I have a new perspective toward life and the circumstances associated with it. It's easier for me to understand why people act and react certain ways. I'm learning about personality disorders, defense mechanisms people employ, why they do, and how to effectively approach these individuals and various situations they create...I am often looked upon as a makeshift counselor among my peers behind these walls of oppression. And in society, I will give the youth an open ear, with quality advice and conducive alternatives to the negative environment and characteristics they are being exposed to in their urban dwellings.

(Chris, Why College)

After reading this piece, I asked Chris if he could try telling a story where he used his ability “to understand why people act and react in certain ways” and “to effectively approach individuals and various situations they create”. I wanted him to show himself in action as a “makeshift counselor” and to elaborate on his work with young people, about which he was obviously very passionate. In his next assignment, Chris wrote extensively about his work with a programme that facilitates meetings between inmates and at-risk youth. He chose to show a scene in which he analysed the interpersonal dynamics in a group of young people, identified the leaders within the group, and successfully appealed to them for help in reaching the rest of the kids. He offered this story as an example of using his coursework in everyday life.

Kieran wrote the most extended example of the behavioural science explanation for a series of events involving both his own behaviour and that of other inmates. Like that of many other students, Kieran’s “Why College” piece was very general, stating that:

The psychology courses in Mercy gave me introspect, they helped me understand my behavior. The sociology classes gave me insight on people and how the environment affects them. Besides introductory psychology and sociology courses, I’ve also taken classes in social psychology, sociology of violence, criminology, philosophy, logical thinking, economy, urban sociology, public speaking, and computers. Together, these classes enabled me to help myself and others in daily prison circumstances.

(Kieran, Why College)

In my margin notes I asked Kieran for more detail and examples three times in that paragraph alone, as well as in his page of written feedback. When the first draft of his final assignment came in, it was an example of how he used college to understand his and others’ behaviour.

The story begins with a behavioural science explanation of why jail is such a “rough and dangerous place to dwell in”:

Men have prison codes which some bring from their ghetto neighborhoods. In order to be respected, they had to be tough and aggressive. Some of them had primitive characteristics, they were territorial.

(Kieran, Final Memoir)

The use of “codes” based on upbringing, the desire for respect, and the “aggressive” and “territorial” behaviour these inspire, are explanations that could have been drawn from any number of the courses Kieran mentioned in his “Why College” piece – most notably social psychology, sociology of violence, criminology, and urban sociology. Further evidence of that connection follows.

The overall structure of the piece is a comparison of one incident that took place before Kieran enrolled in college, and another similar incident that occurred after he had begun his coursework. In the first instance, Kieran described an altercation with another inmate on his housing unit who was known for being a bully and a thug.

I was in that house the longest so I became the head of the house by my seniority. I regulated daily affairs such as serving food and cleaning up. I established some equality in the house. When this individual, Julio, came to the house, I was intimidated by him. I did not know what he was physically capable of and he was a threat to my leadership. I felt reluctant to express my opinion because I was hardened by prison codes, no matter how foolish they were.

One day he was picking on a weak old man. He told the old man “go tell the officer you don’t want to live there no more.” Julio wanted his cell. Everyone was looking at me to do something. I thought my manhood was at stake had I not done anything. My Napoleon complex kicked in and I did not want to seem weak. I grabbed a chair and hit Julio on the head with it...

(Kieran, Final Memoir)

Though this incident took place before he enrolled in college, he analysed it as a behavioural science student would, attributing his violent reaction – one might say overreaction – to his “Napoleon complex” (which refers in part to his small physical stature). He felt “intimidated” and that Julio was “a threat to [his] leadership” and again mentions prison codes to explain why he called upon violence rather than attempting to find a peaceful resolution.

Kieran was removed from the unit, and the story picks up again after he was moved to his current facility.

...When I moved to Sing Sing, I learned how to box. I learned defense strategies and critical hit points. This knowledge of fighting diminished my fear of bigger men. It also prevented me from picking up a weapon when I am in fear. I'm prone to using a weapon when I have one in possession. Once I use it, I get in trouble for severely harming the individual.

(Kieran, Final Memoir)

There is an obvious note of self-awareness in this passage – awareness not only of his standard response to threats but of the specific emotion that causes this response: fear. Alone this statement indicates knowledge that could have come from anywhere, but in his second example of how he dealt with an incident of disrespect, this time after beginning Mercy College classes, it was clear that he attributed his reformed behaviour directly to his college work.

My perception of learning changed when I became a student of Mercy College. I learned about violence, particularly violent subcultures. I could relate to the men in prison who are aggressive in order to be accepted by their peers. This is the way they get respect and good treatment from their friends. As a result, many inmates repress their feelings of grief and do not show any weakness. Those who do, are taken advantage of.

(Kieran, Final Memoir)

He then described his behavioural progression, narrating a “last straw” type of incident with his unhygienic, inconsiderate, extremely unpleasant cellmate (“bunkie”). Kieran wrote that after weeks of this sort of behaviour, the cellmate began loudly passing gas while Kieran was eating, sending him into a rage.

Because I knew how to fight, I was going to beat him without using a weapon. I jumped down from the top bunk with clenched fists, ready to punch him. For a split second I remembered what I learned in social psychology class – that men fight to restore respect when they get disrespect. Then I remembered that people in society abstain from committing crimes because the consequences outweigh the benefits.

I thought about how I got kicked out of a good housing unit in Riker's Island because of my pride and how it would hurt my family if I got kicked out of honor block in Sing Sing. Instead, I told him how I felt of his possessiveness of the cell. I asked him how he would feel if he received the same treatment. He said he would not like it and he did not realize it was affecting me. Later, through my studies, I realized my bunkie is antisocial and I was glad I did not react on impulse.

(Kieran, Final Memoir)

At the moment of decision, Kieran said he called up his social psychology class to guide him towards a better course of action than he might have taken otherwise. As he was standing there preparing to punch his cellmate, he considered his coursework and changed his mind. Whether or not Kieran actually experienced the “split second” thought process he describes here is not the issue; retrospectively he reported analysing the situation using a behavioural science framework (he wanted to fight to restore his respect, but the social consequences of violence outweigh the benefits) and using his coursework to guide his behaviour (deciding to talk instead of fight; asking his cellmate how he would feel upon receiving similar treatment). He understood this incident as one in which he used his coursework to interpret another’s behaviour and control his own, to his own advantage (his bunkie was clinically antisocial and would have reacted badly if attacked). Additionally, recall that Kieran’s retelling of the first incident with Julio is also laced with behavioural science language (e.g. prison codes, Napoleon complex), to which he would only have had access after the fact.

Behavioural science as a new framework of understanding is one of the Hudson Link tools whose presence is easiest to identify. Students adopt ideas from their coursework to re-interpret behaviour, whether this is their own or that of others, whether in a distant memory or recent situation. Notably, none of these accounts or the others like it question whether a college education can actually combat a clinical condition like the ones studied in their psychology courses; students seem to believe that self-awareness is all that is needed to change their problematic patterns of behaviour.

5.4 Role of Adults

Systematic analysis revealed that absent, inadequate, or flawed adult role models in the men’s early lives were a theme in writing by six of the fifteen workshop students. It was not necessarily surprising to hear these types of stories, as “undoubtedly, individuals in prison have experienced far higher rates of childhood poverty, abuse, and neglect than other

segments of the population” (Maruna, 1997: 73). Indeed at least six²² of the fifteen men in the two workshops spent time in group homes or residential detention facilities before the age of eighteen. An absence of adult guidance was somewhat expected in their stories. Though students did not discuss this topic using the same clinical terminology found in the previous section, it seemed to be a universally accepted truth in this community that not having a support system or trusted adult to rely on for guidance could be a major factor in the outcome of a child’s life. This is a message likely delivered by courses such as Family Ethics and Urban Sociology, as well as by the norms of Hudson Link itself.

In fact one of the messages most often conveyed in the figured world of Hudson Link, by senior students and alumni, is how important it is to set a better example for their own children than they had for themselves. My observational data showed one example of a programme graduate (not a workshop participant) speaking of the change in his attitude toward the robberies he had committed; whereas before he saw them as things he did *for* his children, he now saw that they were the only things standing *between* him and his children, and he worried endlessly about the effects his absence would have on them.

The writing data in this section are evidence of another opportunity for Hudson Link students to reframe their understanding of the past to include awareness of various causes and forces that might have been at play in the outcomes of their lives. The goal of this process did not appear to be finding excuses for their crimes, but rather developing the inward empathy and compassion necessary to start down a path of self-forgiveness so they could move forward. One way they did this was by recognising the effects that their adult role models, or lack thereof, may have had on them.

Ben was one of the students who drew the most explicit connection between his upbringing and his current circumstances. He understood and explained his entry to the street life as the result of growing up in a home where almost all of his family members made their living through engaging in a wide variety of illegal activities:

²² This figure represents the number of men who explicitly spoke or wrote about their experiences in a group home or juvenile detention setting. I did not systematically collect this information from the entire sample.

The bedroom occupants, my instructors, consisted of unemployed drug users, a drug dealer, a clothing booster, and a fully employed matriarch who had no obvious vice other than a frequent taste for sweet brandy or wine. These were my family members and from whom my initial education was acquired...

...I would later enter the public school system, but it had minimal impact on my educational experience. I just could not grasp its value. Since the streets were from where the majority of my adult family members developed into the subjects from whom I was initially educated, it did not seem bizarre when I gravitated to the streets for further instruction.

(Ben, Final Memoir)

Ben's involvement in the streets did not seem unusual or cause concern to his adult role models because they were the ones who had first modelled those activities for him. Drug use and sale were effectively among the norms of the figured world in which Ben was raised.

The issue of role models also manifested through the description of adults, both parents and teachers, who could not be trusted or relied upon despite their physical presence. Ryan offered a dramatic example of this, writing about how he lost interest in school as things went from bad to worse at home:

At the start of my education, I loved school. Reading, because of its ability to provide me with an escape from my mother's second husband's abuse, became my favorite pastime. I also loved all the information books held, but by the time I started third grade school wasn't practical for me...I had more pressing matters to deal with; steering clear of the monster my mother married when I was eight years old...getting punched in the face and having to bear the shame of a black eye was something I knew wasn't normal. I'd learned to handle the beatings, but not the evidence they left for the world to see.

So between the beatings, being too tired to make it to school and my playing hooky, school soon lost whatever appeal it once held, which was as it ought to be since it definitely wasn't a safe haven for me. I don't recall anyone checking on me or investigating my "I bumped into the door" excuses for the black eyes I'd occasionally come to school with.

(Ryan, Final Memoir)

Discovering that no one at school was the least bit interested in helping him with his situation at home, Ryan started staying out all night to avoid being in the house at the same time as his mother's husband (who, in all of his writing, Ryan never once refers to as his "stepfather"), leaving him exhausted during school hours. His would-be role models at school – his

teachers – did more than just ignore the obvious signs of physical abuse. One actually managed to expand Ryan’s expectation to be hurt by adults from his mother’s husband to all adult males in general, as highlighted below in bold.

The teachers [on the streets of Brooklyn] were more attentive than Mr. Zinzendorf, my fourth grade teacher who’d told me after a particularly rough day – for both of us – in his class that I wouldn’t live to see my eighteenth birthday and’d end up in jail before then, had ever been.

*Although I can’t recall what I told Mr. Zinzendorf, I’m sure I did my best to disrespect his ancestry, specifically his mama – as was my way back then – since a nine year old only has so many weapons he can use. **I’m also sure I watched him very closely since he was a grown up and a man, because I’d learn to pay close attention to them. So like my mother’s husband, Mr. Zinzendorf inspired me to be attentive to adult males’ moods and attitudes, to try to know it an instant before they might strike.***

(Ryan, Inspirational Teacher, emphasis added)

Neither Ryan’s mother’s husband nor Mr. Zinzendorf offered him any protection or comfort whatsoever; instead one beat him and the other humiliated him in front of his classmates. The “abusive attention” he received made such an impact that by age nine, all grown men had become potential threats. Ryan drew a very explicit connection between this treatment and his disengagement with school:

So by the time I was free of my home life and, at twelve, placed in a Home for Children, school was finished for me or was it that I was finished with it. Whatever the case, my love for school became forgotten history, though I continued to read since during the worst times books, unlike teachers, hadn’t let me down; stories had remained safe havens and escape routes from black eyes and shame.

(Ryan, Final Memoir)

Instead of offering him “a safe haven,” school was just one more place that reinforced Ryan’s mistrust of the adults who were supposedly there to protect him. This explanation also sets a precedent that makes sense of Ryan’s decision to drop out of high school later in the story.

Like Ryan, Cameron depicted the adults in his early life in a very poor light; though present they were totally ineffectual. He portrayed his sixth grade teacher, Ms. Rose, in a way that bore a striking similarity with Ryan's description of Mr. Zinzendorf. Cameron wrote:

She was the first person that I remember telling me I would end up in prison. Maybe she was aware that I'd already been in several group homes by the time I attended her class, but I don't think so. She was referring to my habit of taking the easy way, the quick way. I suppose we could debate whether or not an educator ever should have said something like that to a student, but it turned out to be an accurate prediction. And the reason for it, was that impatience, that laziness. The charge was murder, but that was the symptom, not the condition.

(Cameron, Final Memoir)

There are powerful implications in the framing of Cameron's conclusion that he is in prison today for the same attitude and desire to take shortcuts that got him in trouble in elementary school. Ms. Rose's character has several layers – one in which she was correct about what would eventually happen to Cameron and why, yet another in which she was powerless to stop it. Instead of trying, as an adult role model should have, to help him change directions, she simply tells him where his attitude will land him and leaves it at that. Explaining the power her words had over him, Cameron said during a class discussion: "All the other good things people said, I remember they said something like that, but it didn't stick with me because I knew they were supposed to say it. But telling me I would end up in prison, I was like, 'You aren't supposed to say that to me, so if you're saying it, you must really mean it'" (30 March 2010). Yet we don't get the sense that Cameron held this against her at all; he acknowledged that it may not have been entirely appropriate, but given the rest of the adults in his life it isn't too hard to see why he would not have expected any more from her.

In some cases, it was the complete lack of adult presence that writers used to understand the events of their lives. Graham, who mentioned in one assignment that his father was in prison during his childhood, displayed several scenarios that leave us wondering about even the basic physical whereabouts of the adults in his life. In his "Inspirational Teacher" story, Graham wrote, "I've had many teachers in my lifetime...They've all affected me in some way or other, but the teacher that's impacted me

most is ‘the streets’’. The rest of the piece is a description of all he learned while out on his own in “a rough and tumble environment designed to turn each student into predator or prey”. In fact there did not seem to be any adults in his stories other than a GED instructor in his final memoir, who is depicted as little more than an unsuccessful babysitter:

The next evening, the so-called teacher didn’t even look at me when I arrived so I knew he didn’t even notice I had left the previous night. Attendance was based solely on the attendance sheet. From then on, I went to class, signed the attendance sheet, and left through the side door.

(Graham, Final Memoir)

On test day, Graham left the exam a few times to go outside and smoke marijuana, before coming back in to start the next section. There were presumably adults monitoring this test, but their presence was so inconsequential that they didn’t even bear mention in the text.

In the first four sections of this chapter we have seen the ways that Hudson Link students examine the environments and events of their lives before college. Several of the passages highlighted so far have included examination of the ways that previous figured worlds might have impacted the writers’ lives. While I occasioned the telling of these stories, it is clear from the patterns of semiotic mediation within them and the accompanying observational data that understanding and accepting the past is an important part of membership in the world of Hudson Link.

5.5 Prison as a path to college

The final theme relating to the understanding of past experiences was the idea, found in four of the workshop writers’ accounts, that going to prison was an essential part of the path to earning a college degree. In some cases this was attributed to the fact that for various reasons, the writer never considered college a viable option before his incarceration. In others the idea was framed as the writer’s belief that though education had always been important, he first had to wise up to the hard ways of the world before he could truly appreciate its value. Prison seemed to be understood as something that had to happen in order to arrive at the positive attitude with which they now found themselves.

As we saw earlier, formal schooling was not a significant part of Ryan's upbringing. His abusive home life made attendance and participation in school seem like irrelevant concerns, and once he started gravitating towards the street his focus on formal education totally dissolved. As a ninth grader he forged his mother's signature on a government form that would allow him to drop out of high school before turning sixteen.

...College wasn't in my future and no one seemed to think it should be, although I'm sure I didn't provide them any reasons to. From my behavior and decisions, prison was a lot more likely than college was, which is exactly the path my life took, though it's ironic that prison would eventually lead me to college. Although I started college without a purpose, a number of them were presented during my studies. First, I discovered that college offered me an option for the future, and perhaps I even discovered I had a future. Second, the more classes I attended, the more I wanted to attend and wondered why I hadn't figured that out during high school.

(Ryan, Why College)

The sense from Ryan's description of his early life is that prison was inevitable, and that he and all the adults around him seemed to be aware of this. College wasn't an option before his incarceration – it was only after he began serving time that the possibility presented itself. In fact both the statements “prison would eventually lead me to college” and “I wanted to attend and wondered why I hadn't figured that out during high school” position Ryan's prison sentence as the direct catalyst for his pursuit of higher education. Though he retrospectively asserted that prison was inevitable, he also saw ending up there as what led him to the education where “[he] even discovered [he] had a future” beyond his incarceration.

Like Ryan, Nathan remembered a childhood in which college was not an option because no one in his family believed he was capable of succeeding at it.

“You are wasting your time by putting aside all of this money towards a college fund for Nathan. Julie, I hate to say this to you but your son is just not fit for school. You'll be wasting all of your hard earned money by sending him to college. You should think about having him enlist in the army when he comes of age. That is more realistic for him. Nathan is not smart enough for college.”

I sat in the other room staring into the baby monitor that was picking up the whole conversation, while my baby sister was trying to eat my Notorious B.I.G. CD. My aunt's words were being seared into my brain and heart. “He's not smart enough for college” would be in the back of my mind for a very long time. But what put the

nail in the coffin of my self confidence was that my mother had agreed. I was waiting for my mother to defend me, waiting for her to tell her sister that she was wrong. I needed for my mother to say that she believed in me and my future. I needed her to say that all I needed was extra help and attention, but nothing came out of her mouth...

As the years went on my actions and performance in school proved my aunt right. I did horribly in class whenever I decided to attend and finally dropped out in my freshman year of high school. Since that day with the baby monitor college was not an option for me. Instead I enrolled in the streets. That was all that I was good for, because I was not smart enough for college. This thought eventually led me to prison. Though prison was my punishment, it has become more of a savior than anything. Since my incarceration I have discovered my potential and regained my self confidence. I also realized that my failure in school had little to do with my IQ and ability and more to do with how I viewed myself. I had built walls up within myself that blocked me from accomplishing great things. Why college? Because I am smart enough.

(Nathan, Why College)

I understood from reading this piece that Nathan attributed his early failure in school directly to a lack of self-confidence instilled by his mother, as he framed her low expectations of him (as he perceived them, anyway) as a self-fulfilling prophecy. However I was somewhat confused about the details of the setting; why, I asked Nathan, could he hear voices through the baby monitor if he was in the same room as his infant sister? Baby monitors are not two-way radios, and the monitor in the baby's room would have been transmitting to the unit his mother was holding, rather than the other way around. At this point Nathan explained that rather than a literal memory, this scene was actually an amalgamation of several separate incidents that had occurred during his childhood. The narrative device of attributing a complex emotion and motivator to a single event, like Nathan did here, is a powerful one. Instead of depicting a single and perhaps less dramatic incident, Nathan chose to create a scene that he felt more accurately reflected the extent to which his opinion of himself had been subsumed by the belief that his family did not expect much to come of his life – as evidenced by his mother's tacit agreement that he was “not smart enough for college”.

In this piece Nathan credited the realisation of his own competence and rejection of his negative beliefs about himself to the experience of being incarcerated and eventually finding his way to Hudson Link. His participation in the prison college programme was necessary for rebuilding the confidence to which he directly attributed his current success and

positive attitude. Whether Nathan might have found college some other way is not the point; in his mind, his “punishment” was what turned his life around by leading him to the figured world that would show him he was capable of achieving more than he previously believed to be possible.

Graham was another student whose writing explored the possibility that prison was a necessary stop on the journey to college and, through college, to a better future than he would have found otherwise. Explaining that he did not begrudge his past experiences, negative and destructive though they may have been, Graham wrote:

*I don't pity myself because the streets gave me the toughness and the survival skills I needed to live in the jungle. And I don't blame the system because **if it weren't for yesterday, I wouldn't be who I am today**: a changed person looking forward to becoming a better person tomorrow.*

The streets were my learning grounds: a rough and tumble environment designed to turn each student into a predator or a prey. And I was no exception. However, at the end of the day, the streets may have made me, but the streets didn't break me. The best lesson I learned from the streets is to appreciate life and recognize blessings when they appear. My degree may be in “Hard Knocks,” but I also learned that the bad times make the good times so much better.

(Graham, Inspirational Teacher, emphasis added)

Graham found value in his experiences insofar as they helped him survive his past and appreciate the better quality of his life now that he has rededicated himself to learning and serving others. As someone who always considered himself too smart for school, Graham reconciled the clever but not wise adolescent he once was with the more intelligent, capable man he believes he is today. These data alone do not yet answer the question of who exactly that is – that will be explored in Chapter 6 – but we can see that his identity is one he has constructed through the lens of his experiences. He forged this sense of self by connecting his past and present into a journey that, by its nature, *had* to wind its way through very trying times to end up in better days.

I wasted years of my life chasing smoke and mirrors, destroying my own community, and terrorizing others. I was smart enough to be the King of New York, but I wasn't smart enough to know it was a short-lived career. Looking back, I

could've used my math skills to pursue a career in accounting. The way I brought out the best (and worst) in people, I could've been an entrepreneur. With my scientific understanding, I would've excelled as a chemical engineer. Heck, my disregard for human life could've led me to become a military hero. But I was too smart for all that: I wanted to be a gangster. Pretty smart huh?...

*...My eyes are somewhat open now. The streets may have made me, but they didn't break me. **I had to come to prison** to figure out what I wanted to do with my smarts, but I'm just grateful I figured it out, and better late than never.*

(Graham, Final Memoir, emphasis added)

Graham explored all that *could* have happened given his ability for learning, but concluded that he “had to come to prison” to find out what he was meant to do with his intelligence. Like Ryan he approached his incarceration as a predestined event, without which he would never have been able to unlock his potential and put it to positive use. It is also important to note that the value of these experiences and their impact on identity lie in an imagined trajectory that has not yet been realised. The future is a crucial element of Hudson Link students' sensemaking processes, and will be explored in more depth in Chapter 7.

The idea of prison as the catalyst for education is a powerful one, as it allows for the opportunity to appreciate and value the difficult experience of incarceration rather than seeing the time as a total loss. Understanding and making sense of the most emotionally challenging part of a history-in-person is a key part of the process and one that is encouraged in the figured world of Hudson Link. The personal transformations students described undergoing as part of their ‘fated’ participation in college will shed further light on this subject when they are discussed in detail in Chapter 6.

5.6 Closing Remarks

My argument in this chapter has been that participation in Hudson Link allows and encourages students to develop an appropriate historical consciousness regarding their experiences. This awareness is a powerful tool, allowing the men to get purchase on the events of their lives. Students use the figured world of the prison college as a safe space in which to explore difficult memories and emotions in their pasts, knowing they are in an environment of others undertaking the same endeavour. Hudson Link encourages this

important narrative process through both the formal coursework it offers and the opportunities it creates for the men to share these stories with each other. My writing workshop was one such tool that Hudson Link provided for its students, who engaged with the process of narrative meaning making using the writing resources and opportunities that I as the researcher brought to the context. The workshop members and I thus utilised a double stimulation strategy, in which I gave the students both the task (stimulus-end) of making sense of their experiences, and the tools (stimulus-means) – the activities of the writing workshop – with which to complete it (Vygotsky, 1978).

Many students wrote about strong messages they received from their families regarding the value of education and the rewards that its pursuit could eventually provide. These data add to the emerging theme of using education to achieve redemption on the most basic level – in the eyes of the student’s family, through a type of accomplishment that has been highly prized since childhood. They also contribute to an overall picture of stories in which students have returned to something they have *always* known was important and worthwhile. College participation as an expression of long-term ideas of self will be explored further in Section 6.3.

Frequent stories of “the street” referred to early criminal activity, often leading into explanations of the behaviour that precipitated the students’ incarceration. Data highlighted in this chapter also engaged the ways that students appropriated the material covered in the college programme’s behavioural science curriculum. Narrative explanations drawn from psychology and sociology were especially prevalent in the accounts of their own behaviour and that of others around them. These even included some clinical terminology and references to how students believe the coursework has helped them understand and navigate their environment. There also seemed to be a compelling tendency to explore the role and consequences of adult influence in the students’ histories-in-person, though in this pursuit their writing did not employ the same direct connections to coursework seen in Section 5.3. These data serve as more evidence of a developed historical consciousness, in this case of the possible effects of the environments in which students were raised. Together Sections 5.2 – 5.4 demonstrate some of the ways that Hudson Link students think about their past

experiences through the sociocultural lens of the prison college programme. Taken together they also form a useful backdrop for Section 6.4, which looks at data relating to autodidacticism as a component of student identity within the Hudson Link community.

These stories display a sense among the writers that there were some lessons they had to learn ‘the hard way’, and that their experiences in “the street” may allow them a greater appreciation of the opportunities they have now. These writers then position prison as a path to college, in one of two ways: either the student would never have found college without prison, or he was always meant to pursue a college education but had to learn some difficult life lessons before he could appreciate its value. In both cases, the implication is that incarceration was something they *had* to go through in order to arrive at the more positive future they find themselves planning for today. The function and features of that imagined future trajectory will be explored fully in Chapter 7. Overall, the narrative structure of these pieces ends up serving a dual purpose: explaining where the writer is today both physically (in prison) and psychically (pursuing education with the aim of bettering himself). Sections 5.1 through 5.5 collectively suggest that members of Hudson Link are encouraged, as a major part of their participation in college, to examine and perhaps reconsider the various other figured worlds through which they have already travelled.

An important implication of the data highlighted in this chapter is how the figured world of Hudson Link meets Dewey’s criteria for a school, which should honour the value of its students’ experiences, “respect each person’s attempt to articulate those experiences, challenge those experiences with other interpretations, develop the capacity to inquire further as a result of these experiences, feed into such inquiries the wisdom of past and present people...and prepare them for facing new experiences and managing their lives in the future” (Pring, 2007: 165). Rather than ignoring or delegitimising students’ informal learning, Hudson Link encourages its members to see both the effects that those experiences had on their current circumstances as well as the ways that an appropriate understanding of them can help with future challenges. This is key if we take seriously the educational importance of experience, as highlighted in Section 3.2.

Hudson Link students learn to tell a story of their lives that helps them understand, accept, and in some cases re-interpret their experiences so that they can move forward. Examination of the data reveals that they do this in specific ways, and that they learn these ways of knowing from both formal and informal (or perhaps, academic and social) experiences within the figured world of the prison college. The data also reveal that this framework is part of a process that allows for an empathetic understanding of a man as a whole person, defined by more than the worst thing he has ever done. Emerging naturally and being modelled by senior members of the figured world, this re-interpretation incorporates self-acceptance, sensemaking, and coherence into the life story, and positions students for the engagement with identity that will be explored in Chapter 6. There we will see how working through the events of the past can make way for a reconstructed identity and, in time, a compelling vision of a future trajectory.

Chapter 6: The Tools of Identity Reconstruction

Life is what you make it.

-Chris

One of the Hudson Link inmate clerks, who had earned his Associate's, Bachelor's, and Master's degrees at Sing Sing, was addressing a group of guests that Executive Director Sean Pica had just taken on a tour of the prison. "Everyone on the [housing] block knows me as the Mercy College guy," the clerk explained. "They see me, they wanna know do I got their grades. It's Saturday night, man! Do you think I have your grades?" (16 November 2009). Despite his apparent chagrin, one could hear in his voice that he clearly relished being known on the block as "the Mercy College guy." Pieces of observational data like this one revealed that many Hudson Link students have redefined themselves to some extent by adding *college student* to the identity they construct and communicate to others.

This chapter will turn to the tools needed for identity reconstruction, a second major process Hudson Link facilitates among members of this figured world. As discussed in Chapter 3, this study treats identity as a selfhood practiced both in lived experience and in communication of that self to others. These identities are multiple and socially dependent, as one's cultural worlds and positions determine what will be foregrounded at any given time. As figured worlds offer their members the mediational tools to make sense of their experiences, these meanings become part of an individual's ongoing practice of self. Together with the opportunity to make sense of one's past experiences, Hudson Link's identity tools allow for the active practice of that new sense of self. While encouraging new or revised values, the reconstruction process also incorporates elements of students' histories-in-person, contributing to a sense of narrative consistency – of "rightness" (Bruner, 2004: 693). The data in this chapter help examine this process, engaging with the second sub-question of the inquiry: *Does higher education impact the identities that incarcerated students construct in their role as narrators of their own histories, and if so, how?*

Section 6.1 looks at a common element of the prisoner student narratives: the theme of personal change. The idea of fundamental self-transformation came up frequently in both the writing and observational data, as Hudson Link students attempted to understand and explain their transition from prisoner to prison college student. Accounts of this kind of change referred, implicitly or explicitly, to earlier versions of self that students had now rejected, and which they wanted to leave behind them. While Section 6.1 deals largely with accepting responsibility for past and future actions, Section 6.2 deepens our understanding of the personal change tool by examining how it is adapted by students who maintain their innocence. Section 6.3 then looks at what are portrayed as long-term features of self, which the men learn to incorporate into their change narratives thus maintaining credibility and lending a more convincing dimension of internal consistency.

Two more themes emerged from the writing data pointing to identity tools offered by the figured world of the prison college. Section 6.4 investigates the considerable value that Hudson Link students placed on being autodidacts, capable of teaching themselves out of necessity and or as an expression of identity. Finally Section 6.5 examines the language used in the construction of their discursal selves (Ivanic, 1998: 25-26) – the versions of themselves that appear as the protagonists of their stories – and how their textual choices might indicate the extent to which they have internalised or committed to the language of the prison college's figured world. The modelling of and opportunity for identity reconstruction through the processes examined here, as well as space for expression and validation of the results of that construction, will be shown as powerful tools that Hudson Link offers to its members.

6.1 Personal Change

One of the most common themes found in the Hudson Link student writing data was some kind of personal change or transformation undergone by the author through his participation in college. Twelve of the fifteen workshop participants portrayed education as a catalyst for change, either as the inspiration for that transformation or the route chosen once the writer decided, on his own, that he wanted to change some aspect of his life or himself.

The common thread shared by these accounts is the role that higher education is assigned, as a tool of personal change. It appears that the figured world of Hudson Link offers students the understanding that through their participation in college, they have the opportunity to transform themselves in a fundamentally positive way.

Several writers cited a connection between college and change without an explanation of why they believed such a relationship to be possible. Each of the following passages expresses the idea that college could improve the author in some way, but the exact nature of that change is not specified. There seems to be an assumption on part of the writers that the reader (i.e., me) already understands and agrees that higher education can help someone make personal changes and improvements.

- *I figured I had room for improvement and a behavioral science degree was a perfect way to make changes.* (Kieran, Why College)
- *...College in Sing Sing is in part a gateway and an opportunity...It is an opportunity to better oneself with the higher education offered.* (Francis, Why College)
- *I wanted to better myself and become a college graduate and have a professional career.* (Michael, Final Memoir)

Despite the enthusiasm in these statements, there is no indication of what college is a gateway *to*, or opportunity *for*, or how higher education could facilitate efforts to “better” oneself. I took this as a sign that the possibilities for personal improvement through higher education were such a given in the world of Hudson Link – that the meaning was so “fossilized” (Vygotsky, 1978: 68) – that students assumed it required no explanation. It may also suggest that students saw me as enough of an insider to know how personal change could be accomplished and that this would naturally be the goal of their efforts.

In other cases, workshop writers showed education as something that could help them change specifically by preventing a return to criminal behaviour. The language in these accounts ranged from observations about others to deeply personal accounts of one's own circumstances. In one example of this, Jonathan's “Why College” essay begins with a description of his life in prison before his participation in education. To explain why he needed to transform his life and move away from crime and criminal behaviour, he wrote:

For the first four years of my immurement, I engaged in the dangerous and risk-taking culture of prison: selling weed, carrying weapons, and other negatives of prison you can imagine. I never used any form of drugs, however. Still, I cared nothing about rehabilitation. My only objective was to have my conviction overturned in order to return to the streets. I yearned to continue my reckless standard of living. I was angry, and in retrospect, my first couple of years was an extension of the life I lived in the streets...My "don't care" attitude didn't make matters any better. I can recall an officer on the school first floor where I was assigned as a porter (janitor) instructing me: "Jon, sweep and mop the front and back staircases." And, I replied, "the judge didn't sentence me to maintain prison, she sentenced me to time. Plus I'm allergic to work." Officer Collins then stated, "You're gonna change Jon, watch and see." He was right!

(Jonathan, Why College)

"Rehabilitation" is part of the official language of corrections, and at first seems a surprising choice here because it is a word one expects to hear from a prison administrator, not an inmate. Later in the same piece Jonathan actually used the word "recidivism" in his list of reasons for attending college:

[Education] can be the key if I intend to open any doors to achievable success. It also plays a significant role in terms of closing the door on potential recidivism. It can broaden my options, and gives me an alternative to crime and criminal behavior. Most importantly, it can transform my life and allows me to view life from a different vantage point and through different lenses.

(Jonathan, Why College)

As with his choice of "rehabilitation" in the first passage, here he chose the word "recidivism" – a very specific statistics term – rather than something more personal or informal (such as, for example, "stopping me from committing another crime"). But his word choices are not surprising given the clear importance of the rehabilitative ideal and the college programme's zero percent recidivism rate within the figured world of Hudson Link. These messages of using college to move away from criminal behaviour, worded using a very particular vocabulary, exist across generations of Hudson Link students and administrators. Jonathan can now understand and communicate the story of his own experience using the structure and language of the figured world, because "eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life

narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life” (Bruner, 2004: 694). His expression of this personal change process shapes the experience’s meaning, which in turn shapes both his understanding and expression of subsequent experiences.

Jonathan framed college as “an alternative to crime and criminal behavior” – the same replacement that appears in Ryan’s final memoir. Ryan was a programme graduate at the time of the writing workshop, still heavily involved in Hudson Link through tutoring and other student leadership activities. The narrative of Ryan’s final memoir is a story that seemed to be central to his personal identity, at least within the realm of Hudson Link: I heard him tell this story to tour groups, to other students, and to me in addition to exploring it in the writing of this piece. He started out by explaining that he was initially enrolled in college simply because “it was just something to do”:

I began my college education by chance, being in the right place at the right time and taking advantage of the opportunity only because it was there.. At the time I couldn't imagine that going to prison would lead to a college education or that [college] would become a stepping stone to leave my life of crime behind. I didn't initially embrace the idea or see it as something that would change my life.

(Ryan, Final Memoir)

When Ryan wrote that he “didn’t initially embrace the idea” of college, he was referring to something he said during a discussion in our first workshop session – that even after choosing to pursue a college education, in his words, “It was another four years before I decided to stop committing crimes *in prison*” (19 January 2010). His assertion here that he had no initial intentions of changing his behaviour or his life contributes to the sense of his shift in perspective later in the piece.

Ryan attributed his decision to take college more seriously to his last trip solitary confinement. He was sent to disciplinary segregation because he had been caught with \$100 in cash, which inmates are not allowed to possess. As he sat alone in his confinement cell that first night, asking himself what crime had done for him, he came to a conclusion: he would

have to turn his back on crime and commit himself to his education if he was going to make a positive change in his life.

During my time in the box, I had made a conscious decision to live a crime free life, something I hadn't done since I was ten years old. I needed something to replace my criminal schemes – the deals in the yards – and college was it. Without any involvement with crime, I knew I'd take advantage of the chance. College became a window of opportunity for me; it allowed me to see and step beyond my old life. I was able to explore not only my old behavior but discover my talents with the confidence to pursue them.

(Ryan, Final Memoir)

Here, like in Jonathan's writing, we find the notion of replacing crime with college. Ryan's personal narrative of his decision to change his life tied his move away from crime directly to his serious pursuit of higher education. It was not just college that he dedicated himself to in this moment, but the complete transformation of his standard operating procedure both inside and after prison. Upon re-joining college after his time in solitary confinement, Ryan's personal change was to trade in one total lifestyle for another. Perhaps even more important than his reasoning at the time is the fact that in his retrospective recasting of this decision, he makes sense of his participation by seeing it as replacing crime with college. We should also note Ryan's framing of this replacement as a "conscious decision", depicting a relationship between college and personal agency that will be explored further in Chapter 7.

The final type of personal change that I saw students attribute to their participation in higher education was a transformation in their perspective on and understanding of society. Noah wrote about college as something that helped him expand his viewpoint and see his place within a broader societal context.

As I sat in class after class with professors who made the learning environment their life, I began to be aware of the world. I became conscious of history, and all the wars, discontent, injustice, and social strife that society has experienced...it's the process of learning that is the most valuable aspect of college; the ability to experience your own change in perspective as new information conflicts with your old views. It's unfortunate that not everyone gets to go through this change in perspective, but I can attest that it's a priceless experience.

(Noah, Why College)

Here Noah explained that college propelled him to a perspective on the world that was greater than his own personal view of it. Just the opportunity to learn what a change in perspective felt like was valuable to him. Personal change, not just in behaviour but also in a more nuanced understanding of the world, is a valued possibility of participation within the figured world of Hudson Link.

Graham's final memoir also explored the moment to which he attributes his change of perspective – when his new mindset and desire for personal transformation clicked into place. He dated this revelation to an evening shortly before he began his college education. He had just won a weight-lifting competition in the yard, bench-pressing 315 pounds for an admiring crowd of other prisoners. Noting that he felt no sense of satisfaction from the victory, he began to contemplate the meaning and substance of power.

The most powerful people I knew were not physically strong. They were feeble looking, and most of them had gray hair. People like Maya Angelou and Ossie Davis. The Dalai Lama and Bo Lozoff. And the ones who came before them. Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Nelson Mandela and way back to Jesus. The truly powerful people in history wielded power without the need to show it. Their power did not come through violence or physical acts. Their power was based on love and education. They used their minds, not as weapons, but as shields. They used their hearts as sponges to absorb others' pain. And it hit me: power resides in the mind and the heart. It's a state of being. I wasn't sure how, but I knew I wanted to do it...

(Graham, Final Memoir)

This scene was positioned within the greater text as the explanation for Graham's decision to pursue college in prison. In it he resolves his narrative of a lifelong struggle with the street with the assertion that through the pursuit of higher education, he can change for the better. He would no longer value smaller-minded concerns like physical dominance when there was greater power, "based on love and education," to be harnessed if one was only aware of it. That change would not just transform his behaviour and approach to problem solving, but would expand his entire worldview – and he assigned college the role of tool for that transition.

It may be significant that the majority of textual examples in this section came from the “Why College” assignment. Observational data indicate that with the wording of this prompt, I may have unwittingly channelled a narrative request that students received often in other contexts. For example in a discussion between Hudson Link students and a group of outside guests, Sean opened the conversation in the following way (using the programme vernacular “guys”, the term Hudson Link staff members use when referring to their students or addressing them directly): “So to the guys in the room, I thought we could just start off by going around and saying...Why? Why are you doing this?” (16 November 2009). It seems that members of Hudson Link are called upon to answer the “Why College” question more often than I initially realised. The way that students viewed me, both in terms of my relationship with Hudson Link (as an ally) and of my affiliation with higher education (as a doctoral student), may also have influenced the way they answered the question “Why College”, and the extent to which they felt it necessary to explain or articulate that response.

The writers cited here all positioned higher education as a catalyst for personal change. These data are evidence of a powerful message – one that may have been initially instilled by family members (as seen in Section 5.1) but which has certainly been reinforced in highly specific ways by the figured world of the prison college. Whether taken for granted or connected in a deeply personal way to one’s own experience, these writers have internalised an understanding of higher education as an agent in powerful and lasting transformation.

6.2 Adapting the Change Narrative

One might note the importance of the concept of personal change in Section 6.1 and wonder if every Hudson Link student bought into the idea that he needed to change. At first it did seem that accepting responsibility for past criminal behaviour was a major part of Hudson Link membership, simply because there were so many public demonstrations of men being open and vocal about the events that led to their incarceration. On my very first day inside the prison, for example, I watched the 2009 valedictorian speak with a surprising level of candour about his crime: “In my selfish state of arrogant ignorance, raging against my

wounds, real and imagined, I took the life of another human being. For this despicable act, I was deservedly sent to prison” (Valedictorian Address, 3 June 2009). The more time I spent in the field, the more often I encountered that same humble candour among others. Several of the men in the writing workshop wrote or spoke in a way indicating that they had accepted their guilt and subsequent punishment. There were comparatively few Hudson Link students claiming innocence.

However, one of the notable features of the Hudson Link programme revealed during data analysis was that its tools seem to be useful to members of the figured world regardless of their feelings about their own innocence or guilt. Looking at the personal change narratives of those who maintained their innocence demonstrates a great deal about how this particular tool of understanding could be adapted to fit individuals with such disparate perspectives on their situations. Andrew and Chris both provided data that might indicate their feelings about their incarceration as well as further evidence displaying their appropriation of the personal change concept. It is important to remember that in speaking of students’ guilt or innocence, what matters is not an objective ‘truth’, but the student’s perspective on whether or not his incarceration was just. According to this study’s conceptual framework of identity, we have to take seriously the notion that *perceived* innocence or guilt is just as consequential as *actual* innocence or guilt to the ways students choose to act upon the world.

In the first workshop, I asked the men to write about a “moment of clarity”. Andrew wrote about the clarity he found at the moment of his sentencing, when he “realized that the justice system was not just”. Though he did not explicitly declare his innocence, I inferred from this statement that he did not believe the correct decision had been reached. It is hard to say for sure, because Andrew was never more forthcoming with the details of his case, other than brief mentions, in other pieces, of his “street life” and some of the trouble he got into there. What is clear, however, is that his most declarative statements regarding his reasons for pursuing a degree are laced with language about personal change.

In his “Why College” piece, Andrew explained his mindset before joining the college programme:

I had no plan on how I was going to spend these seventeen years. I would be just like a dried, autumn leaf being blown by the wind, taking me in whatever direction it blew. I realized that my life was just like that leaf before I came to prison. My life was without direction, without goals. That bothered me.

(Andrew, Why College)

Distraught over his sentence, Andrew began to reflect on the life he had lived before prison. After concluding that it was too unfocused, without direction, the narrative switches to the present tense to represent his thought process at the time that he decided to pursue higher education:

*Should I spend my time in prison the same way I spent my life outside? **I needed a change. Prison is giving me an opportunity to start my life anew. I can use this time to change myself, my old way of thinking, how I treat myself and others. Maybe I should go to college here. It might point me in some direction that can help me figure out what I want to do in life. It might give me information to help me find purpose or meaning in my life.***

(Andrew, Why College, emphasis added)

Andrew attributed his decision to participate in the college programme to the possibility of using it to change, as highlighted in bold above, so that his life would be less like the dried autumn leaf from his previous passage. At the very least, this echoes those men quoted in Section 6.1 who accepted their guilt and hoped that college would help them change. But Andrew has clearly made use of Hudson Link's semiotic resources even if he does not believe he belongs in prison. Through his pursuit of higher education he hoped to change by "find[ing] purpose or meaning", so that unlike that hapless autumn leaf he could develop a sense of agency. That agency would be important for any incarcerated person, regardless of innocence or guilt (Maruna, 1997).

Chris was another student whose writing displayed appropriation of Hudson Link's tools even though he explicitly maintained his innocence. At the time of the workshop Chris was heavily engaged in appealing the conviction on which he had been incarcerated since 2000. Again, his actual innocence or guilt is not important, but knowing that he maintained

his innocence can put some of his writing into context in a way that helps us understand the figured world of Hudson Link.

In his “Why College” piece, Chris stated that he had begun selling drugs after dropping out of high school, “engaging in a dangerous cycle of life that led to my current term of imprisonment”. Explaining the effects that college had on him since then, he wrote:

*[Since starting college,] I have a **new** perspective toward life and the circumstances associated with it...I'm **no longer** wasting my time in prison. In fact, I am using my time constructively **now**. Attending college has provided me with an opportunity of achieving something positive in such a negative environment...As a lifer, prison is often seen as a place where we are cast off from society, sentenced to waste the duration of our lifetimes in cages and prison yards. But **with college I have been able to change my circumstances...My whole life has changed because of my experience in college**. Networking with students and professors, I continue to learn on a daily basis. My mind is **no longer** stagnant...I manage my time wisely **now**. I analyze it, and constructively put it to use for the **betterment** of my family, myself, and others within my community.*

(Chris, Why College, emphasis added)

Chris was in prison on what he maintained was a baseless murder conviction, not on charges of selling or using drugs. Yet he wrote that his lifestyle “led to” his incarceration, apparently accepting the premise that he contributed in some way to his own unfortunate situation. Additionally Chris called his current surroundings as a “negative environment”, suggesting that no matter how he ended up incarcerated he would still have to work proactively to neutralise the effects that these “cages and prison yards” could bring. Though his status as a lifer did not change, Chris stated that college had allowed him to alter his circumstances through gaining a “new perspective” and a more constructive use for his time; in so doing he had thwarted the course set out for him by his status as a lifer. He found a way in which the idea of personal transformation could be useful despite believing that his conviction was undeserved, and he attributed that transformation, using the language highlighted in bold above, to his participation in college. Even though he saw his incarceration as unjust, Chris nonetheless adopted a meaningful personal change narrative similar to those so often found within the prison college environment.

These connections are somewhat tenuous because the writing workshop was not aimed at discovering students' feelings about their innocence or guilt, but observational data may put some of Andrew's and Chris's meanings in perspective. After leading facility tours of the prison for Hudson Link programme supporters, Executive Director Sean Pica usually arranges for a discussion group with a handful of their students and alumni. One of these discussion groups, which I silently observed, took place shortly after the exoneration of a Hudson Link student who had been incarcerated for 26 years on a wrongful conviction. His exoneration was an exciting event in the Hudson Link community, and the men wanted to tell the programme supporters about it.

This student had been convicted of a particularly gruesome crime, and throughout his entire incarceration he maintained his innocence despite the advice of his friends, who told him (correctly, as it turned out) that the parole board would not let him go home until he admitted to and apologised for what he allegedly had done. They would have to keep him in prison forever, he had replied, because he knew he simply had not committed the crime of which he was convicted and therefore would not apologise for it. To make matters even worse, a retired police officer had exculpatory evidence that could have freed this student, but he had already exhausted all of his appeals by the time it was recovered.

As Sean and the men discussed the details of the case, it was unfathomable to think of spending two and a half decades in prison for a crime that a member of law enforcement knew and could prove you had not committed. A heavy silence hung in the room, until one of the men broke it by saying, "He didn't do that awful thing they said he did, but, you know, one thing he did understand was that he wasn't living right before they arrested him either." (The exonerated student had previously served a short sentence for attempted robbery.) The justification that "he wasn't living right" echoes Chris, who admitted that his involvement with drugs "led to [his] current term of imprisonment", and Graham, who in Chapter 7 will say that he deserved to be sent to prison – just not for the crimes on his rap sheet. About the exonerated man, another student added, "And you know, there's no way he would've gotten a master's degree if he hadn't been locked up" (16 November 2009). The idea of prison as a path to higher education, as explored in Section 5.5, was present again in this discussion of

how though his incarceration was unjust, this student had to go to prison in order to find his way to college.

I did not interview the exonerated student myself, so I cannot say if he would have agreed with the men who spoke of his college degree as if it were a silver lining to the atrocity he had to endure. Yet it was clear from the discussion of his case that among members of Hudson Link, he was seen to have undergone a valuable personal change despite his innocence of that particular crime. In their minds, he had come to the important and correct realisation that he still needed to turn his life around and avoid the negative influences of prison during those two and a half decades. Together with the writing data from Andrew and Chris, highlighted above, we see how Hudson Link students make sense and use of the idea of personal change regardless of their opinion of their own innocence or guilt.

6.3 Incorporating Lifelong Identity

In addition to narratives being logical and believable, they also have to maintain a certain level of consistency, for the audience as well as for the teller. Eleven of the fifteen students drew explicit connections between their participation in higher education and what they saw as lifelong aspects of their identities. In some cases, it seems that Hudson Link encourages students' awareness of their own innate intellectual ability, and how it could now help with the pursuit of formal education. In others, students explained that college had helped them revise their own self-understandings and unlock their previously unrealised potential. The data in this section will show how Hudson Link students use their history-in-person to make sense of their participation in college, as well as how their participation in college helps them see their history-in-person in a new light.

One way that students explored the relationship between lifelong identity and college participation was through the idea of being naturally smarter or more intellectually gifted than their peers. Several of the men mentioned that while growing up, they were always the brightest students in their class, often without exerting any effort whatsoever. The following examples demonstrate this:

- *Upon entering school, I learned to read rather well quickly, always ranking either first or second in my class. Within two hours of starting [my first day of primary school], my teacher told the principal that I was too bright for her class, so I was promoted to a higher-grade class. (Francis, Learning to Read)*
- *Despite my unconstructive attitude, I was always overly mature and intelligent for my age. (Jonathan, Why College)*
- *As I was growing up, I became the “good example”. I felt proud of being the example to be followed. I felt important, that I was my father’s favorite, and that I was smarter and more intelligent than my siblings. (Michael, Final Memoir)*

These men chose to describe themselves in ways that foregrounded their natural intellectual ability, even if their narratives would later show them squandering those talents by not taking formal education seriously. It seems that natural intelligence is a valued quality within the figured world of the prison college; one can imagine among another group of fifteen men, *at least one* might try to impress his reader with some other detail: perhaps his physical strength, his sexual prowess, or how much money he made. Instead, Hudson Link students are encouraged to be proud of how well they did, or could have done, in school.

Michael’s narrative of intellectual superiority, as seen briefly above, begins with comparison to members of his own family. Though Michael wrote that he now sees his father’s encouragement and favouritism as a tool of manipulation to inspire competition amongst his siblings, the drive to rank first academically obviously stuck with him. His description of his favourite teacher shows that Michael’s pride in his own intelligence, demonstrated in the statements highlighted in bold, lasted into secondary school:

*When we got to Analogies, **it was my opportunity to shine**. I liked to think and rationalize the analogies. It was like puzzles, **I liked the challenge and was good at it**. When [the teacher] asked the class and nobody answered, and I raised my hand and answered the question correctly, he used to send me to write it on the blackboard. **I felt proud**. Then, when everybody volunteered and their answers were wrong, he finally singled me out and asked me for the right answer. It was like asking me to come to the class’s rescue, and **I always gave him the right answer**. He loved that and smiled. **I felt like I was an example of intelligence** or something like that. But I really enjoyed analogies, it was like a game to me. I just analyzed every part of the initial analogy and every part of each one of the options, and always found the appropriate answer. I can tell Teacher Fernandez liked me because of that. **He saw me as a smart student**. He always greeted me with a smile and **I felt he admired me**.*

(Michael, Inspirational Teacher, emphasis added)

It was not just his teacher's admiration in which Michael took pride, but also the fact that getting the right answer came so naturally to him. Analogies were fun, like a puzzle, and he understood intuitively how to solve them. Michael's description does not even make the task sound especially difficult, except in the way he remembers that he was often the only one who could "come to the class's rescue" when no one else could give the correct answer. That natural ability made him feel admired and appreciated. Michael's love for and sense of pride in academic accomplishment lasted into his initial education in the prison system:

At Riker's Island I enrolled in the ESL class and continued learning English. Although I already had a high school diploma, and even two years of Naval Engineering, I enrolled in the GED class...I thought that Americans always think that Latinos are less than them and that because we do not speak proper English we are stupid, so I wanted to take the challenge and take the GED with other guys from the US. I would show them that the level of education in Colombia was very good if not better. Well, I was able to boost my ego when I scored 330 on the GED exam. The minimum required to pass is 225 and I saw guys struggling to get those 225 points and others having to take the GED exam several times. I passed it at once and scored no more no less than 330 points, the second highest score in Riker's Island according to the Academic Supervisor.

(Michael, Final Memoir)

The value placed on superior academic ability has obviously been with Michael his whole life, and it goes some distance to explain both why he would pursue higher education to begin with as well as why he would work so hard to excel at it. His participation in Hudson Link has obviously not dampened his enthusiasm for academic accomplishment or his pride in his own, for intellectual ability is a valued asset in the figured world of the prison college.

The men in the writing workshop actively defined themselves in ways that supported their identities as college students. For Will, attending college was more about his love of learning than his natural talent for it. On the index card I asked them to fill out, introducing themselves to me, Will wrote:

Any learning opportunity appeals to me...Everyone knows that I am pro-education/learning. Every moment I can find is spent studying something. Some friends of mine say I'm an alien or a cyborg.

(Will, index card, 13 October 2009)

After he read this aloud, a few of the other men in the class laughed at the word “cyborg”, and one said in a friendly manner, “He really is.” When I asked what that meant, Will explained that he spent all his time thinking about academic topics, including those that he studied on his own; friends inside the prison would most often find him lost in thought about one of these subjects. “Everyone always asks me, ‘Do you ever sleep?’” he said. Being a learner, even outside the formal classroom setting, was one of Will’s most outwardly projected personality traits. Through his participation in college he found a space to express that identity and see it accepted and encouraged.

Cameron and Graham both recalled being the smartest child in their childhood classrooms, though neither used this to the advantage that they might have. Cameron wrote:

I didn’t exactly do well in school. I was obviously smart, perhaps brilliant. I consistently scored A’s on tests that not only had I neglected to study for, but had completely forgotten about. I just as consistently neglected to turn in homework...I managed only mediocre grades. Knowing my potential, my teachers were often frustrated, and we were seldom on the best of terms. If my teachers were frustrated by my waste, my parents were heartbroken. “Cameron, you could be anything if you just applied yourself,” my mother lamented.

(Cameron, Why College)

Cameron’s acknowledgment of his own academic potential may have facilitated an easy transition to an identity based to some degree on his pursuit of a college education. The idea of innate intellectual ability and of unrealised potential set up a narrative explanation of his college participation that “makes sense”: Hudson Link was finally giving him the chance to succeed in formal education as he always could have but never did.

Graham’s description of his early school years was much the same. Like Cameron he recalled doing well without trying, until everything seemed so easy that he was no longer interested in trying.

I was always ahead of the class in school. I’d often do my homework the morning it was due. Sometimes I’d do it on the way to school or in the class while other students trickled in. And often I’d still do better than everyone else. I even waited until the last

minute to study for tests, if I decided to study, which most times I didn't. And, without cheating, which many other students did, I'd score the highest grade in the class...As I coasted through high school, I realized I was not only smarter than the other students, but some of the teachers too.

(Graham, Final Memoir)

Though he clearly knew that he was smart enough to do well in school, Graham's description of his early engagement with education does not portray his academic ability as a particularly positive thing. When I asked the men to write about a pivotal moment in their education, Graham chose the day he took his GED exam. So inebriated from alcohol and drugs that the words "danced around on the paper", Graham still outscored every student in his class.

One would think that was a good thing, right? Wrong. That was my defining moment. That GED sealed my fate and destined me to either die or go to prison. I got so full of myself, cockier than ever, because I was officially too smart for school, college, or myself.

(Graham, Final Memoir)

Graham wouldn't find peace with himself until later in the narrative, after his participation in Hudson Link and his realisation that simply being smart wasn't enough. He could now view his intelligence and natural ability for academic work as lifelong identity traits that Hudson Link had helped him channel into an appropriate outlet.

It is hard to determine from these data alone if the feeling of superior academic ability and determination was part of the Hudson Link rhetoric or something these students possessed prior to their participation. Perhaps those who seek an undergraduate education while in prison are those who have naturally excelled in school throughout their lives. Yet many of the men quoted in this section, while believing themselves to be capable of doing the work, did not describe success in their early academic endeavours. The shift from an identity based on unfulfilled potential to one based on accomplishment in a formal arena may be an important one, and may indicate Hudson Link's role in this identity reconstruction.

The writers cited so far seem to have understood college as the natural progression of their identities as intelligent, academically capable men. They portrayed the experience of

higher education as an opportunity to use something that they had previously wasted. Yet there was just as powerful a connection drawn by students who reported using their experiences of higher education to gain new insight into their old self-understandings, and perhaps to revise their sense of their own innate abilities.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Nathan said his involvement in street life began when he started internalising his family's low opinion of his potential to succeed in higher education. Believing his aunt's sentiment that he was not smart enough for college, Nathan engaged in the behaviour that would eventually lead him to prison.

Though prison was my punishment, it has become more of a savior than anything. Since my incarceration I have discovered my potential and regained my self confidence. I also realized that my failure in school had little to do with my IQ and ability and more to do with how I viewed myself. I had built walls up within myself that blocked me from accomplishing great things. Why college? Because I am smart enough.

(Nathan, Why College)

This sense of self – a lived identity as someone “smart enough” to take on the challenge of higher education – was one of the major tools that Hudson Link offered Nathan. Not only did he now express the belief that he was “smart enough” for college, but he also attributed his past failure or success in school and in life more to his own self-image and confidence than to objective academic competency. Nathan believed that his sense of himself – his *identity* – would determine his outcome, and his new identity included the belief that he was capable of “accomplishing great things”, starting with a college degree. What he needed was not increased academic ability, but simply the realisation that the messages he got early in life about his abilities were wrong. Overcoming past failure, especially failure due to a lack of belief in oneself, was a valued goal in the figured world of Hudson Link, and this piece of writing feels to me to be a particularly representative example of that model.

As a last bit of evidence related to the identity Hudson Link encourages in its students, I offer the following passage from a piece of Noah's writing. During the first workshop Sean said he wanted the next issue of the programme newsletter to include short essays written by a few of my students describing what their upcoming Associate's degree

graduation meant to them (another example, I might add, of Hudson Link offering its students an opportunity for active projection of their reconstructed student identities). Three students in the workshop were anticipating this particular graduation, but one had just lost his grandmother, so I extended the invitation to Noah and Will. While this is not strictly part of my dataset, it is a piece of writing that Noah and I worked on together; more importantly, it serves as a perfect example of the learned Hudson Link narrative about identity:

Of all the things I have experienced in life, I am most acquainted with failure. Failure was so familiar to me that any minor achievement was a breach of my comfort zone. I accepted failure as the inevitable outcome of any attempt at success and purposely avoided making plans for the future. It became an excuse for not challenging myself with new and difficult tasks. Ending up in prison was no surprise, and, in my shortsighted perspective, it was a confirmation of my ineptitude.

Just as I reached rock bottom and my sense of worthlessness was at an all-time high, the Hudson Link program taught me that I could succeed. I too could finish a lengthy task. I could do well in school. And I could change years of not believing in myself. The Associate's degree I have been fortunate enough to earn is a testament to that...If it was not for Hudson Link, my acquired optimism would have been a perpetual pessimism, and I would have kept failure – my longtime enemy – as my only friend.

(Noah, Newsletter Article)

This narrative contains a message that Hudson Link students are frequently encouraged, in various ways, to live out for programme supporters, prison administrators, each other, and themselves: how an identity based on discipline, hard work, and success in a long-term formal pursuit can help uncover hidden potential and combat a lifetime of low self-esteem, even self-hatred. It exemplifies Sean's assertion, recorded several times in my field notes, that to complete the degree programme, a student must "believe that there is someone inside him worth fighting for". Noah was aware that the newsletter in which this piece would appear was used to build momentum and support for the programme, and seemed to tap into an identity narrative laced with Hudson Link ideals and vocabulary as he told his story.

Hudson Link encourages its students to re-construct their identities based on the idea that, whether or not they are aware of it, they *already possess* the ability to succeed in an academic arena. These identities allow for the inclusion or reinterpretation of abilities that students have either discovered or retained over the course of their lives. The strength of this

inclusion may therefore be that it contributes to a certain level of consistency in self-image and believability of the change narrative discussed in the first two sections of this chapter.

6.4 Self-Teaching

Data from seven of the fifteen participants' writing also indicated that among workshop students there was a high value placed on the ability to teach oneself, rather than relying on formal education. In many cases, this seemed to be the result of leaving school at an early age and needing to adapt by gaining the necessary life skills through informal education (the type described in Section 5.2) and self-teaching. In all cases, it seemed that the belief in oneself as a naturally curious person, capable of independent learning when the situation required it, was part of a mindset that allowed for survival and intellectual growth despite the prison environment's limited resources.

Noah explained that his desire to teach himself was the result of a long period of self-reflection following his trial. In a scene that will be discussed in full in Section 6.5, he shows himself sitting in the courtroom during his trial, unable to understand many of the words used in his case proceedings. After realising that the difference between himself and the people he saw in court was in their respective levels of education, he dedicated himself to the project of learning all he could.

All I wanted was to learn and know things. I wanted to be able to understand what others said, and why. Soon after that, I was questioning everything else. More than just questioning words I started questioning the world in general. I became the adult version of those annoying kids who ask too many questions.

(Noah, Final Memoir)

At this point, Noah's only learning opportunity in prison was to teach himself, which he did using books from the library.

I loved recreation, although I never went for it. The gym, yard, and movies assured everyone left the block. This was my only chance to have peace and quiet and I treasured it. I forsook everything else to stay in my cell and read. On Sundays, I read the most – an average of 10 hours. I kept a list that grew to hundreds of books in

about two years. History, philosophy, religion, classics and social problems were my most read subjects. I never had a set structure on what I was reading until I was introduced to the college programs.

(Noah, Final Memoir)

The reading habits that Noah cultivated in his cell apparently carried over to his undergraduate career; he was so serious about his self-teaching, he told me, that he read few novels, instead prioritising books he believed he could *learn* something from (13 November 2009). Clearly in his interpersonal interactions, his autobiographical self (Ivanic, 1998: 25) – the Noah that held the pen and authored this text – placed a great deal of value on being an autodidact when the situation required it. Yet his choice of the word “forsook” in the above passage reveals even more through its connotations of sacrifice. Though Noah must have on some level enjoyed reading in order to pursue it in such a dedicated manner, in this passage he has constructed a discoursal self (Ivanic, 1998: 25) who gives up activities once loved in pursuit of a greater purpose. The value of autodidacticism is something he pursues both in the way he acts out his identity and in the way he communicates it to others.

Will’s “Why College” essay provided more evidence of the value placed on self-teaching within the figured world of Hudson Link. A college student at the time of his arrest, he wrote that he would have liked to continue studying during his incarceration, but was always told there were no undergraduate programmes available. Once the prohibitive cost had ruled out correspondence courses, Will took an alternative route to the knowledge he wanted to gain:

Instead, I just began reading every non-fiction book I could find about any topic whatsoever. I even had various college-degree syllabi sent to me so I could study the books that were required for each course. I figured that even if I could not afford a correspondence course, I could at least obtain the same knowledge by reading the same books. It would be like attending all the classes but not receiving any credit. I’ve always had an incredible, almost insatiable, thirst for knowledge, and I love learning about anything and everything. It was this desire that fueled my ambition. I once read a book called Auditory Psychology and, while reading it, I wondered to myself, “why am I reading this?” I frequently found myself reading and studying things without any purpose in mind, other than to learn something new.

(Will, Why College)

To some extent Will's desire to self-teach may be attributed to a pattern of necessity that stretched back to his early life. Previous accounts, including teaching himself to drive and learning about financial aid for college only in passing from his girlfriend's mother, displayed a similar lack of teachers and guidance. In his "First Day of School" assignment he wrote about living with a host family while studying abroad in Japan, and yet again there was no mention of Will's own family – no scene of his parents waving goodbye to him at the airport, no recollection of homesickness or postcards sent back to America. Alone these omissions might not mean much, but taken together, Will's body of writing paints a clear picture of someone who had been guiding himself through education from a young age. In Will's description of self-teaching we observe the way that a lack of adult role models, as discussed in Section 5.4, could be brought to bear specifically upon the educational realm of his experiences.

The necessity of self-teaching was clearly part of the value Will and others assigned to it, but further descriptions of such activities suggest that there may still be more to it. In the second workshop assignment, Will wrote about learning to read the textbooks he ordered when he decided to learn French in prison. Without a formal opportunity to do so, he purchased an introductory-level textbook so he could study the language on his own. When the book arrived, it was written completely in French, and Will realised that he would not be able to learn the pronunciation without any guiding information in English – so he ordered another book to complement the material in the first one. Will then learned French by sitting in his cell with both books open, looking back and forth between the two, for hours at a time. Structurally the essay begins with an introductory paragraph, written from the point of view of Will's present day self, reminiscing in a general way about the experience:

As I sit here in 2009, I remember distinctly the crazy things I went through in order to learn to read French back in 2002. Although I've learned a couple of other languages since that time, with each of them requiring different methods of study, none requires as much determination and dedication as the French language...

(Will, Learning to Read, ellipsis original)

After two blank lines to indicate a temporal shift in the story, it picks up again in the present tense, narrating his thoughts and actions from 2002:

I'm sitting on my bed in my cell at the Forest Hill Correctional Facility, slowly leafing through the pages of a textbook in utter confusion. This book is a college-level French textbook – something I bought recently in an effort to learn French.

(Will, Learning to Read)

Will framed the entire account of events in this story in the present tense, until another temporal shift led to a conclusion paragraph written in the same past tense style as the introduction. Will used the present tense portion of the essay not only to recount past actions and events but to allow him, to literally stand in for a past version of himself. In constructing this discursal self, he created and positioned a narrator with the authority to represent the meanings and intentions of Will from 2002, and who could foreground the parts of his identity that he found important then – or that Will's autobiographical self found important now. At one point in the process of trying to learn French Will very narrowly avoided giving up:

You know, maybe I should just put French aside and move on to another language. It's a tempting thought, but I can't really see myself doing that because I would rather embrace a challenge than run away from it.

(Will, Learning to Read)

This projection of a self who did not give up, who “would rather embrace a challenge than run away from it”, was a characteristic that Will imbued consistently in his discursal self, as seen in the following highlights of his “Learning to Read” piece:

- “None [of the other languages I have learned] required as much **determination and dedication** as the French language...”
- “...my **hard work** is paying off...”
- “I'm so glad that I **didn't give up** initially...”
- “The **determination and effort** I exhibited with learning to read that language was also the same I exhibited with learning Italian, Russian, and, more recently, Chinese.

*By far, Chinese is the **most difficult**...it was the **tedious** experience I went through while learning how to read French that has allowed me to learn other languages **without giving up**."*

(Will, Learning to Read, emphasis added)

With the words in bold Will described characteristics of perseverance and strength in the face of difficulty, and the heightened importance of this quality was demonstrated through both his autobiographical and discursive selves' commitment to it. His natural curiosity and the necessity of being his own teacher was obvious, but his language suggests that the true value – the real victory – of teaching himself, was that he struggled to do it on his own and eventually persevered. Some of his pride in the accomplishment lay in the level of its difficulty and his complete independence in attaining it. The value of self-teaching within the figured world of Hudson Link seems to be multifaceted, and based not just on its utility in academic pursuits but more broadly as an approach of self-reliance in problem solving.

At this point one might wonder how this autodidacticism translates to an educational endeavour like the Hudson Link programme, in which professors lead lessons for groups of students in a fairly traditional pedagogic environment. Some answers may be found in Jonathan's writing, in which he declared a dedication to his own personal search for knowledge despite his participation in formal education. In his "Why College" piece, Jonathan described his conversation with members of the Caribbean African Unity (CAU) inmate organisation that culminated in his decision to enrol in the college programme. This passage begins as other CAU members are offering reasons *not* to attend:

The final rationale was based on Marcus Garvey's statement that "...[t]o be learned in all that is worthwhile knowing. Not to be crammed with the subject matter of the book or the philosophy of the classroom, ... Many a man was educated outside the classroom." This argument was then juxtaposed with the statement of reggae artist Capleton who insist, "Babylon (anything, anyone, or a system that seeks to 'downpress' a people) [intention is to] try and limit I&I²³ as a race an' a nation an' a people weh dem give us O-levels [bachelor's degree] and PhD's an' then them lock wi off inna a corner an' se whatever I taught you that's all you know. But the real authentic tings weh yuh fi know bout yuhself..dat never taught inna the college..."

(Jonathan, Why College, all parentheses and brackets original)

²³ "I and I" is a term from the Rastafarian dialect of Iyoric, meaning "you and I" or "we united under the worship of Jah," the name of God in the Rastafarian religion.

Jonathan's fellow CAU members expressed concern that college might be a tool to "downpress" Rastafarian culture by encouraging the rejection of any knowledge, vision, or wisdom gained outside the specific, narrow scope honoured and validated within academia. In his decision to pursue higher education despite these risks, Jonathan reconciled his participation in college with his cultural values, saying:

...The conclusion was that higher education is important and, despite the institution of learning, it is the individual's responsibility to remain grounded and "no sell out fi sweetie." I expressed and assured my brethren that I could travel the road and remain conscious of the struggle.

(Jonathan, Why College)

Despite joining formal education, Jonathan intended to continue teaching himself, and making his own sense of things, rather than submit or surrender to the ideals of, as he once called it to me in conversation, "the white man's brainwash institution" (23 February 2010). He was not just an autodidact out of necessity, but also because it would help him keep sight of his "authentic" self even within the context of formal education.

Self-teaching may be a value that Hudson Link encourages in various ways in order to prepare students to overcome the obstacles they will undoubtedly face as they attempt to earn college degrees inside. If one believes that being an autodidact will help him master this particular challenge – and especially if he believes that he has always been one – this may become a self-fulfilling prophecy. The fact that the men chose to highlight this self-teaching in their writing indicates that it is an important part of the identity offered, encouraged, and lived within the broader culture of the figured world they have opted into.

6.5 College Writing

Though the workshop I offered was clearly advertised and facilitated as an autobiography and memoir writing course, I often received texts that sounded like they were composed as pieces of persuasive or expository writing, in the cultural tradition of English 101 or Freshman Composition (cf. Bloom, 1996). Systematic analysis confirmed the

presence of overly academic diction and structure in writing by nine of the fifteen workshop participants. I understood this in part as evidence of my role in the process – rather than seeing me as an impartial outsider, students treated me as they would any other college teacher who had asked them to complete a college assignment using college writing techniques. But it follows, then, that there is a type of writing that Hudson Link students take to be ‘college writing’. I first saw this apparently academic approach to the writing prompts as potential evidence of student disempowerment and a loss of personal identity in favour of a privileged institutional discourse, as in early work in the field of academic literacies (Lea, 1994; Lea & Street, 1998; Ivanic, 1998). However I came to realise over the course of the workshop that this use of language was not a silencing of students’ ‘authentic voices’, as I originally thought, but deliberate choices they made in expressing and presenting themselves. Language was a tool of identity construction, re-enforcement, projection, and maintenance. Language was an arena of agency.

The prompts I created for the workshops were intentionally vague, because I wanted to see what the men would choose to write about if given assignments that carried a wide variety of possible interpretations. Even so, I thought the “First Day of School” prompt naturally leant itself to storytelling, and I expected to receive stories and anecdotes. So it surprised me when for the first assignment, many students turned in writing that seemed stiff and overly formal for the context of a creative writing class. Even some of the writers who did tell a story used language that would have seemed more at home in an expository essay. “Therefore”, “thus”, and even “aforementioned” were commonly found in the men’s first drafts of several different assignments. “However” was such a frequently used, incongruous transition word in the writing of men in both groups that my refrain to “break the However Habit” became a running workshop joke.

In addition to these transition words, much of the writing seemed overly formal in both structure and tone. It was at the endings of the students’ essays where I first noticed this trend. The men often closed their pieces, even those written in memoir style, like Michael did in this example from his “First Day of School” piece:

Definitely there are a lot of especial and exciting things about the first day of school which, of course, make a big difference and make starting a new school year more interesting, since there are so many expectations and in a way, the excitement of the unknown and the surprises one as a student can find in the first day of school.

(Michael, First Day of School)

This paragraph offers no new information, but seems to be an attempt to summarise and synthesise the ideas of the paragraphs that precede it – like a traditional conclusion paragraph in an expository essay. Persuasive writing structures like this one were common in the data. My only explanation for this at the time was that the men saw me on some level as a college teacher and thus believed I expected them to turn in ‘college writing’.

Francis’s final memoir featured a closing paragraph that similarly perplexed me on first reading but which now serves as a useful illustration of how the men’s textual choices could actually be understood as assertions of agency. The first page focuses on how his reading skills developed over time, allowing him to move from simple stories like *Robin Hood* to more complex texts requiring analysis and critical thinking. The piece is then punctuated with the following passage:

However, learning to read can be very provocative or misunderstood, because what is written is not always interpreted as such. Such an example could be found in the 2nd Amendment of the United States Constitution: “The right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.” However, there seems to be a general conflict as to the interpretation to this part of the Constitution. Some scholars have concluded that this amendment affirms a broad individual right to gun ownership. Others interpret the amendment as protecting only a narrow right to possess firearms as members of a militia. Therefore, learning to read took on a different dimension as it concerned the interpretation of the Constitution. Therefore, this form of reading and understanding what you read becomes complicated, because of the various forms of how we could interpret the languages therein.

(Francis, Learning to Read)

This passage has a number of significant features that place it within the academic genre: the subject matter, which has moved from personal anecdote to objective illustration, using the 2nd Amendment, of how written texts can be read in several ways; the formal diction and tone, with phrases such as “interpreted as such”, “Some scholars have concluded”, and “the languages therein”; and the sense of rational objectivity conveyed in the way the writer

presents two opposing sides of an issue but never comes down in favour of either. My initial reaction to this paragraph was concern that Francis didn't feel he had permission to express himself more personally or creatively within the workshop assignments. In analysing the text's rich features, however, I now see this elevation of tone and subject matter as a message to me – a message that Francis was a serious student, who wanted to write about serious subjects, and who wasn't going to compromise that for the "Learning to Read" prompt. The subject matter and the language chosen to explore it are instead evidence of a process of deliberate construction and expression of identity.

There was in fact a clear awareness among Hudson Link members of the importance of powerful genres, which was evident in their writing and which, as I have already stated, I originally misinterpreted as a feeling of constraint in how they were 'allowed' to express themselves in the workshop context. One such example of data that spoke to the importance and meanings of language came from Noah's final memoir, where he described his confusion while listening to his own trial:

I looked around the crowded courtroom with frustration – an uncomfortably familiar frustration to me by this point. Except for key words, everyone seemed to be speaking Chinese.

"The defendant's heinous actions counter the mores of society," declared the prosecutor, but what did that mean in English? I knew he was talking crap about me because that's what he always did.

"Your Honor, I object to any irrelevant statements to this testimony," countered my lawyer. Whatever that means, it sounds great for my defense. I leaned toward him as far as the heavy iron shackles allowed me.

"Mr. Frankel, what did you just say?" I asked helplessly.

"I'll tell you later, let me focus on this hearing first," my lawyer mumbled, annoyed as he usually was.

His explanation never came. I had to figure it out myself again. If I am the subject of their freaking hearing, why can't they use language I can understand? Although by this time I was a teenager with about ten years of experience with English, their words were just as foreign to me as when I was in the 5th grade...

...Whenever I returned to Riker's Island after a court hearing I tried to look for the definition of those rare words. Heinous? Mores? Irrelevant? The dictionary was the Rosetta Stone that deciphered the unknown and inaccessible. I spent hours trying to make sense of a ten-minute court hearing...

...On one of those long hours of reflection and word-deciphering sessions, I realized what created the gap between the court people and me – they were educated, and I was not. That very night my Rosetta Stone became the most valuable object in my cell. It was the first time in my life when the Bible was dethroned in value... All I wanted was to learn and know things. I wanted to be able to understand what others said, and why.

(Noah, Final Memoir)

For Noah, the importance of using “educated” language was wrapped up not only in his pursuit of a college degree but with a very real power negotiation he witnessed between actors whose primary strength came from their ability to communicate on an “educated” level. Noah’s dictionary made those court proceedings accessible to him by allowing him to participate, if only passively, in the dialogue that would decide his future. In this passage, vocabulary words are positioned as the gateway between his own level of education and those of the attorneys and judge. Those words alerted him to what he came to see as his own educational deficiency, and it was initially through mastering the language of the court that he planned to close that gap. In fact Noah demonstrates with this one scene his understanding of a point salient to all who concern themselves with the study of genre theory, discussed previously in Chapter 3: linguistic genres serve as tools of power and positioning by providing access to privileged realms of social life. He instinctively understood from experience the crux of Cope & Kalantzis’s (1993: 7) argument that “In our commonsense understanding of lawyer’s language, or academic language, or chess player’s language, we know these are social realms from which a lot of people are excluded, and this pattern of social exclusion is marked linguistically. Learning new genres gives one the linguistic potential to join new realms of social activity and social power.” Perhaps the writing data highlighted here hold some weight as a response to Cope & Kalantzis’s critical stance towards progressive literacy pedagogy and scepticism regarding the usefulness of student experience in the teaching of textual mastery.

There were also instances in which students made clear not only their awareness of powerful discourse but also their explicit desire to manipulate it in their workshop writing. Will was one such student, with whom I worked perhaps the most on adopting a more informal narrative tone. In the process of revising and discussing his final piece, I got an

unequivocal explanation of his relationship with language. The stimulus was a sentence in the first draft of Will's final memoir that read:

My legal education still is not complete, and I doubt it can ever be. The law is constantly evolving, and I must stay abreast of it at all times.

(Will, Final Memoir)

I went back and forth with Will in edits about the second sentence; I thought “abreast” was too formal, but he disagreed. In his final draft he did change the sentence to read “I must keep up with it at all times”, but attached the following note, titled ‘My Academic Word Choice’:

*I don't speak the same way with everyone. If I think a person will not understand what I'm saying because of his or her educational attainment (or lack thereof), I will speak very casually. On the other hand, **I dislike having to “dumb down” my speech.** I love learning new words and increasing my vocabulary, as **words are among the most powerful tools available to mankind.** They start wars, they bring about peace, they cause tears, they cause smiles, they secure business contracts, they facilitate understanding, etc. **Many people are judged by the vocabulary they use, just as they are judged by their appearance during an initial encounter.** In recent years, I've begun speaking to people as if their vocabulary were as erudite as my own. They don't always understand me, but I do it anyway in an effort to encourage them to increase their vocabulary. **In this environment, it is easy to assimilate to the uneducated speech and slang that exists.** If someone doesn't understand me, I explain what the words means, and then I encourage them to grab a dictionary and start reading. Also, some words possess very concise definitions, such as “abreast”. I prefer that word to “on top of” or “up to date”. I am careful, though, not to sound pedantic during everyday speech, only because I don't want people to feel I am putting them down somehow. If I'm sure that someone will not understand certain words, then I will speak on a level they can understand (which occurs when I explain legal issues). **My word choice requires a delicate balance based on context and audience.***

(Will, personal communication, emphasis added)

After receiving this note, I told Will that I understood his point, and that my intention was to encourage him to sound not uneducated, just less formal. Looking back, it makes sense that he chose his words, as he said, based on “context and audience” – ultimately he was in a college context writing for an audience that consisted of myself (a known doctoral student in a teaching role) and his college classmates. Will, like Noah and many other men in the

writing workshops, easily recognised, *from experience*, Ivanic's (1998: 33) assertions that "Some discourses are more powerful, and/or more highly valued than others...Every time people write, they reaffirm or contest the patterns of privileging among subject positions which are sustained by the relations of power in the institution in which they are writing." The incarcerated students' daily struggle with the identities assigned to them and those to which they committed themselves had made this idea clearer to them than to me.

Systematic analysis of my observational data put the academic, literary, or otherwise formal styles in which many of the men chose to write in context. Before the writing workshop began, I spent a day with one of the programme clerks looking through the textbooks that Hudson Link students use in their coursework. The English books were of special interest to me, because I wanted to know what sort of writing the men might have already done in their regular classes. The following is the book list for the three levels of English offered to Hudson Link students:

- **English 109:** Flachmann, K. (2007) *Mosaics: Focusing on Essays*. 4th edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- **English 111 and 112:** Meyer, M. (2008) *Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*. 8th edition. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's.
- **Writing guides available for borrowing:**
 - Langan, J. (2001) *College Writing Skills*. 5th edition. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
 - Langan, J. (2004) *College Writing Skills with Readings*, 5th edition. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
 - Wyrick, J. (2005) *Steps to Writing Well: with Additional Readings*. 6th edition. Boston, MA: Thomson/Wadsworth.
 - Raines, A. (1998) *Keys for Writers: A Brief Handbook*. 3rd edition. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
 - Strunk, W. and White, E.B. (2000) *The Elements of Style*. 4th edition. New York: Longman.

The programme clerk, himself an alumnus, told me that most students take two of the three available English levels. When I asked him which texts he remembered reading, he picked out William Shakespeare, Sophocles, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Gwendolyn Brooks, Franz Kafka, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes from the Meyer anthology. I also asked if any of his classes had given them opportunities for creative writing, and he laughed and responded: "No, the rule was, 'This is NOT a creative writing class.' The rule was, 'Stick to the script'" (9 October 2009). It became apparent

through looking at their reference books and hearing about the range and scope of their English coursework that a very specific style of written expression is modelled and reinforced for Hudson Link students. I see now that I interpreted the clerk's statement as a complaint that he had not been given a chance to express himself – when perhaps the students willingly adopt this style of communication because they recognise and appreciate its potential as a powerful discourse.

My own influence on the data presented in this section does not escape me; rather, I believe it reinforces the idea that language is one of the tools offered to members of the figured world of Hudson Link. Our writing workshop sessions took place in the same building, even the same rooms, where the men attended their college classes. The executive director and academic coordinator brought me in and introduced me. I asked the men to write about their education – on a few occasions to write specifically about their experiences in college. It is no wonder at all that these writing workshops, though absolutely optional and voluntary, were treated as part of the college experience. The language with which the men chose to express themselves in the context of college is as much evidence of how they viewed me as it is of how they viewed college – a specific context requiring a specialised, privileged form of communication.

Through their textual choices, the men presented themselves as college students – as educated men despite their surroundings within the prison. This finding makes sense given the theoretical framework of the study, which affirms that the language one uses to tell the story of his identity is as much a part of that identity as the events of his life. The language that the workshop students used to tell me their stories revealed itself as one of the tools that Hudson Link offers them to aid in the process of identity reconstruction, and is one that they use when they both live and project those identities.

6.6 Closing Remarks

At the 2009 graduation ceremony, the class valedictorian began his speech by telling the audience about the self-hatred he felt when he was first incarcerated. He genuinely believed himself to be worthless, he said, deserving only of a place among the “disposables

on the garbage pile” of society. Having been encouraged by his wife to try college, he came to see higher education as a process of recycling:

“...All of you who support education look at the landfill as a recycling centre. You see potential and strive to provide us with the refining process necessary to nurture it. It isn’t easy and it’s not always pretty. The recycling process can be downright painful. First, scrubbing away the memories of past failures, then removing the labels of criminal, convict, loser, trash, and felon. Sanitizing away the bacteria of ignorance, insecurity, doubts and self-deprecation. Smashing the stigmas of poverty, the drop-out mentality, addiction and violence. Heating things up, raising the bar, skimming off false belief systems and damaging negativity; purifying and empowering with knowledge and truth – melting fears and replacing them with hope until we are transformed into new, useful and valuable resources – fit for society and able to shine. Education is our recycling centre.”

(Hudson Link Valedictorian Address, June 2009)

This recycling metaphor is a powerful one, especially in the context of the writing data examined earlier in this chapter. Hudson Link students are shown an image of higher education helping them filter out the negative qualities and behaviours of their past selves while salvaging the parts that can be useful now and in the future.

This chapter has demonstrated that Hudson Link offers its students a range of identity tools, which allow them to reconstruct the person that they want and believe themselves to be as they live out each of their days. A learned transformation narrative that honours the desirable characteristics a student feels he has always possessed allows him to embrace and maintain the positive aspects of his history-in-person while turning away from the negative ones. By placing a high premium on self-teaching, students are encouraged to take ownership and responsibility for their own academic outcomes, though they may not be able to have much impact on their surroundings or immediate future. Having a privileged dialogue in which to understand one’s new sense of self and project it for others is an important part of experiencing, legitimising, and internalising that identity reconstruction.

I have no doubt that I had a significant influence on the writing highlighted in this chapter. As previously mentioned, much of the data related to personal change emerged in the “Why College” assignments, and this was no coincidence. From my observational data I know that the narratives excerpted here are just the kind of personal story that Hudson Link students are asked to tell all the time, to faculty members, to each other, and to sympathetic

outsiders. These stories are powerful tools that Hudson Link students use to move past the negative behaviours and attitudes of their ‘old lives’. It makes perfect sense that they would have seen the writing workshop as another invitation to tell that story, and to tell it in the language with which they have learned to express themselves in the context of higher education.

In Chapter 7 I will look at how Hudson Link students take their understandings of the past and senses of self in the present into the activity of thinking about and planning for the future. As introduced briefly in Section 6.2, one of the important tools that Hudson Link offers its members is the opportunity to develop a sense of agency – of having some sort of control or input into the future direction of their lives. Students’ understandings of where they are going turn out to be as important and meaningful for their identity and behaviour as their understandings of where they have been. These future directions will be explored through analysis of the trajectories that students envision as the endpoints of their narratives.

Chapter 7: Approaching the Future

There is hope for me yet!

-Jonathan

The previous two chapters asked how Hudson Link students made sense of their lives first by gaining new insight into their pasts and then by constructing powerful identities they could live with in the present. In this third and final analysis chapter, I examine students' ideas about the future, and how their participation in Hudson Link may have influenced or been influenced by these ideas. To begin unpacking these perceptions, Section 7.1 considers the attitudes about the future value of higher education that students reported having before their participation in Hudson Link. This section may go some way towards identifying the values that students brought with them and contributed to the figured world. Additionally, given the retrospective nature of their observations, the prison college context may have had an effect on these understandings, as some of the latter examples will show. Section 7.2 deals with those conceptions that the writers explicitly attribute to a point after they had already become a part of the programme, revealing some of the messages that Hudson Link gives its students about the future value of their efforts. Section 7.3 looks at the relationship between college and the future found in the idea of using higher education to prevent history from repeating itself. Section 7.4 then focuses on data describing the specific features that students imagine when they try to envision their futures. Collectively the data featured in this chapter will help us understand how students use higher education to envision and make sense of a future they are in the very process of creating.

The workshop prompts asked the writers to reflect in large part on their past experiences, resulting in less frequent future talk than might have been found using a different methodology. Additionally, with one exception, the workshop members were all between five and fifteen years away from their first parole hearing, which many of them could not realistically expect to win. Concrete action plans for release were obviously not at the forefront of their minds at the time of the workshop. Therefore in this chapter I draw

more heavily upon my observational data, including public testimonies of men in the programme, many of which can be seen as modelling and reinforcement of Hudson Link values and messages. An important element of figured worlds is the way in which their members contribute their own meanings to the group context. To understand what individual values students might have brought to the figured world of the prison college, I turn first to their early ideas about higher education and the future.

7.1 Future Value of College Before Participation

In Section 5.1, the writing data revealed many students who reported messages from early childhood about the value of education. These messages suggested possible reasons some of the men pursued college in prison, as well as some of the pre-existing ideas from which the prison college context would build meaning. This section investigates a similar pattern of writing data in which seven of the fifteen students addressed their early ideas about the value of higher education specifically in regards to their future lives.

When Jonathan described his early images of college, he seemed to have the idea that higher education could elevate his future quality of life beyond what he had experienced so far. He wrote:

I had always dreamed of attending college and becoming successful so that I could take care of my mother. Watching her struggle to push her trolley selling “grato” (a form of bread) and butter, washing our school uniforms and yard clothes with blisters on her fingers, only to make sure we had food – even if it was only sugar an’ water an’ bread – clean clothes to wear, a roof over our head, and to make sure we attended school.

(Jonathan, Why College)

Following his statement about taking care of his mother with a description of how she struggled to provide for her children seems to indicate that Jonathan hoped college would raise his family’s standard of living. The structure of this passage positions higher education as an opportunity for socioeconomic mobility, and this is a belief Jonathan may have contributed to the figured world through his participation in it.

Will used even more explicit language to articulate his childhood belief that his future life would be different, and better, as a result of going to college.

Growing up, college always seemed to be my ticket to a better life. It was one of those distant dreams that kids talk about, especially the kids I grew up with. I used to envision a nice house, a nice car...a nice life. Yes, I could not wait to go to college, get a degree, and begin a career. A college degree would surely provide a life in stark contrast to the one I was used to at that time.

(Will, Why College)

As in Jonathan's description, Will believed college was connected to the safety and financial security of increased earning potential. In the figured world of his childhood friends, success through higher education was an often-discussed aspiration. It is likely that Will brought this attitude with him to the figured world of Hudson Link – a world in which, it should be said, he and his peers believe in and frequently discuss the future possibilities, created by higher education, that could “provide a life in stark contrast to the one [they are] used to” as inmates in a maximum-security prison.

In some cases, students' explanations of their decisions to pursue college outside and in prison offered it as the prerequisite for a “career”, without explaining what career they referred to or why it required a college education. Kenneth, who had previously attempted college twice before his incarceration, wrote of his decision to start the second time:

*After years of, how should I say; “of sowing my oats”, I [had] come to the realization that in order for me to have **any type of career** I needed a college degree. So I decided to give it the “ole college try”²⁴ once again.*

(Kenneth, Why College, emphasis added)

²⁴ The expression “college try” is an early- to mid-20th century sports metaphor, defined by Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (2003: 244) as a “zealous all-out effort”. Early usage suggests that it usually refers to a sports play that one makes a big show of attempting though it almost certainly cannot be done – in effect to avoid being blamed for not trying (Walters, 2003). Whether Kenneth intended that connotation, or used the phrase as a play on words because the task he was attempting was actually college, remains unclear to me.

Kenneth never specified the type of employment he thought a degree would help him achieve, but he drew an unmistakable connection between college and career. Yet of course there are values and assumptions underlying the idea that a “career” requires college, for there are in fact many careers that do not. Kenneth would have brought these values to the Hudson Link context just as Jonathan and Will brought theirs.

These examples are not offered as a way to trace the exact source of students’ beliefs about college. They simply serve as a reminder that these men made their own sense of the meaning and importance of higher education prior to their participation in Hudson Link. They also suggest that some students may have been initially drawn to the prison college context because Hudson Link validates and encourages an idea that already made sense to them.

Two other students, also ostensibly describing their pre-college perspectives, wrote about the decision to join Hudson Link in a way that further revealed the complexity of the sensemaking process. Section 5.2 explored Andrew’s justification for dropping out of high school, and the education he received on the streets, “better than any prep school or Ivy League college”. There he describes this learning as “first-hand knowledge of life’s offerings”, with no mention of where he hoped these lessons would take him. Later, however, he wrote:

I had no plan on how I was going to spend these seventeen years. I would be just like a dried, autumn leaf being blown by the wind, taking me in whatever direction it blowed. I realized that my life was just like that leaf before I came to prison. My life was without direction, without goals. That bothered me.

Should I spend my time in prison the same way I spent my life outside? I needed a change. Prison is giving me an opportunity to start my life anew. I can use this time to change myself, my old way of thinking, how I treat myself and others. Maybe I should go to college here. It might point me in some direction that can help me figure out what I want to do in life. It might give me information to help me find purpose or meaning in my life.

(Andrew, Why College)

The second paragraph of the above passage is written in the present tense to indicate inner monologue that occurred before he joined the college programme. In contrast to his previous

statements about the superior value of *informal* learning, this passage shows Andrew considering college as a way to take control of his situation. He contemplated its potential as a tool to help him achieve agency through the refiguring of his sense of purpose or direction – one might say, his sense of identity. His use of an analogy to nature, the leaf being blown by the wind, seems a particularly elegant demonstration of Holland and Lachicotte’s (2007: 116) explanation of the way in which “As a higher-order psychological function...An identity is a key means of escape from the tyranny of environmental stimuli.” In Andrew’s case he considered the possibility of escape from that tyranny and the reclamation of agency through the pursuit of higher education. Given how much this approach to formal education conflicts with his earlier writing, one might wonder about the role of the figured world in his account of that decision.

Noah’s writing also raises questions about how the norms of the Hudson Link context might have shaped his explanation of his choice to pursue college. In his accounts of life before prison, he never indicated whether he expected to go to college someday. But his description of his decision to do so suggests that he, like the other men quoted in this section, believed that college was a prerequisite for “building a career”. His explanation then goes a bit further, revealing more about his understanding of college and its relationship to his future.

When I noticed I was lagging behind in achievements, college became a necessity. I read often and seriously, but those books were not going to make my resume look good. I played guitar, but I knew it was more for recreation than for building a career. My peers’ academic success only accentuated my lack of education. I needed to catch up and escape from my past failure. College in prison and beyond would be my redemption.

(Noah, Why College)

It seems rather unusual for an incarcerated man to be considering his résumé and future career options. Undoubtedly, many would like to prepare themselves for employment after release, as evidenced by the long waiting lists for education and training programmes in prisons across America. Yet it is safe to say, at the very least, that many would not have the sense of hope for the future, fostered by a programme like Hudson Link, needed to speak so

confidently about “building a career”. This passage therefore asks us to consider whether in addition to his own individual ideas, Noah might have called on certain Hudson Link values in retrospectively recasting his motives for pursuing college.

Another significant feature of this passage is Noah’s reference to redemption. Redemption has been mentioned previously in this thesis, in the review of literature on redemption narratives in Chapter 3 and in my records of witnessing the performance of such narratives in my observational data. Understanding students’ usage of the word “redemption” requires a bit more exploration, however, because of its multiple definitions and possible meanings. Redemption can refer to atonement for sin, to repayment (and often freedom through repayment), or to restoration to an earlier state – all of which have interesting semiotic possibilities. Whatever the intended meaning in this particular context, “redemption” is a word that is frequently repeated and symbolically nurtured within Hudson Link. As in Bakhtin’s (1981: 294) notion of heteroglossia, “the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language...but rather it exists in other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one’s own”. In Noah’s use of it, then, we may be seeing another example of the refiguring of his earlier ideas about college through the lens of the programme narrative. This is not to say that Noah did not bring his own experiences and values to bear upon the word, but simply to point out that the concept is significant in context, and its meaning is both appropriated and shaped by members of the figured world.

Jonathan, Will, and Kenneth displayed early ideas about college that it appears they may have brought with them and acted out within the figured world of the prison college. Noah and Andrew’s writing, though it deals with decisions they made before starting college, raises the question of what role the figured world might have had in their retrospective recastings. The next section of this chapter will allow us to look closer at the possible messages at work within the prison college context, and how they might have interfaced with students’ earlier notions.

7.2 Future Value of College During/After Participation

The data highlighted so far informed my understanding of ideas that students predated to their participation in the Hudson Link programme. The writing of four of the fifteen students also demonstrated how their participation might have affected and shaped those ideas in turn. These data reveal a great deal about the figured world of the prison college, and about the messages that students receive about education during their membership in this world. They demonstrate the ways that the values and norms of Hudson Link built upon the meanings and understandings they brought with them to the context.

In his “Why College” essay Ryan discussed the relationship between college and the future in a telling fashion:

*Although I started college without a purpose, a number of them were presented during my studies. First, I discovered that a college education offered me an option for **the future**, and perhaps I even discovered I had **a future**.*

(Ryan, Why College, emphasis added)

In his first use of the word, Ryan indicated that college offered him “an option for *the future*” – in this case, he seemed to mean that it offered him something tangible he could use in his future life, perhaps while searching for jobs after his release. But the second usage, “perhaps I even discovered I had *a future*”, introduces a new idea through the article change. In this case, Ryan was alluding not to a literal future, in the sense that education would continue to keep him alive from day to day, but a figurative one containing opportunities and the potential for success and happiness. In a ‘just deserts’ system of corrections where punishment is chosen based on perceived retribution for past actions, the encouragement to shift one’s perspective to the future and the language in which to do it may be central to the Hudson Link programme’s appeal.

Observational data indicate that the idea of ‘having a future’ through college participation is an operational ideal within the figured world of Hudson Link. In the graduation speech mentioned previously in Chapters 5 and 6, the 2009 valedictorian reflected: “Prison is very much a survival game, and I arrived equipped with attitude and

some street smarts, enough to avoid the worst of it. See, I thought I could make the best of my life-long confinement and loss of freedom that I faced. I knew I had no future, simply an existence.” He didn’t doubt that he would continue to survive, so the “future” to which he referred here is again figurative, as in Ryan’s second use of the word in the passage above. Later, discussing his life after college, the valedictorian said, “I have a vision for a future full of prospects,” going on to cite the personal qualities acquired through his college experience that have improved his future possibilities. In this very public demonstration he modelled the way in which he used his experiences in higher education to mediate his thoughts about and plans for the future.

Chris was another student whose writing revealed the ways that the figured world of the prison college might have impacted his ideas about higher education’s relationship to the future. In the discussions leading up to his final memoir piece, he told me that the part of education he most wanted to write about – what meant the most to him – was the experience of becoming a teacher. Acting as a facilitator for the Youth Assistance Program (YAP), which brings “at-risk” teenagers to the prison for a discussion group with trained inmate counsellors, Chris described how he used his Behavioural Science curriculum to analyse the group dynamics of the kids, gain insight into their frames of mind, and then understand how best to reach them.

One of the ways that Chris and his team worked with the kids to “capture their attention” was by staging an altercation with a corrections officer, who we later discover was in on the plan. At the beginning of the teens’ YAP visit, the supervising officer stopped a youth and yelled at him that he saw him trying to smuggle something into the visiting room. The officer then told him to get against the wall and submit to a frisk search, before Chris stepped in and demanded that the officer stop harassing his guest. The officer then responded, “I don’t know why you’re sticking up for him anyway. This will be his home in a few years.”

In addition to gaining the student’s trust by protecting him from the guard, Chris staged this scene in order to get the whole group thinking about the possibility of prison being “home in a few years”. After showing this example, Chris explained the follow-up

procedure in which he and the other facilitators stressed the value of getting an education as a *tool* – his word – to avoid the future they might otherwise face.

*We always end our [YAP] sessions on a similar note. Through our non-traditional approach, **we arm our youth with educational tools of wisdom**. We capture their attention by illustrating the austere conditions of imprisonment. We show them the consequences of bad choices and fatal decisions. Then **we harp on the significance of higher learning and the vast opportunities that a proper education can create**.*

(Chris, Final Memoir, emphasis added)

Having previously credited his ability to be an effective YAP counsellor to his Behavioural Science coursework, Chris showed here how Hudson Link had helped him make a connection between higher education and future possibilities. He felt so strongly about this connection that he made it a special point to pass it on to the young people he cared about.

Kieran also wrote about his perspective on higher education's role in his future, but as in the examples at the end of Section 7.1 his work revealed a more complex interplay between his own values and those of the figured world. In this way his writing further developed Holland *et al.*'s (1998: 169) warning against the "simplistic notion that identities are internalized in a sort of faxing process that unproblematically reproduces the collective upon the individual". In his first piece of writing for the workshop, Kieran wrote:

It has been a while since I've been in school. I never thought I would be back to school, especially in prison. This time it's a little different. It's not like the middle school and high school years where I did not care about how an education affected me or my future. This time I actually like going to school. School gave me redemption, it gave me salvation, and it gave me hope. Knowledge made me realize the mistakes that I've made and how I can become a better person. Knowledge made me aware of the world around me and how important it is for people with an education to change the world. Now for the first time in my life I accept the fact that I will be in school for the rest of my life and that each day is an opportunity to learn something new, just like the first day of school.

(Kieran, First Day of School)

This passage contains several identifiable themes that have been discussed in this chapter and the previous two: the idea that education affects one's future, that college offers

“redemption... salvation...and hope”, and that one can achieve a degree of personal change for the better through awareness of past misdeeds. By this point, it seems clear enough that these messages are characteristic of the figured world of the prison college. One might also observe that in the norms of Hudson Link, Kieran demonstrated here that he was going to college for the ‘right reasons’. Yet, in the passage below, written two weeks later, Kieran mentioned some of the more tangible benefits of college:

[The] commissioner of corrections, helped pass a bill which cuts six months of our time when we earn a degree. For others, college looks good for the parole board. A degree gives good credentials for a job or at least sets the foundation for a higher education upon release.

(Kieran, Why College)

Not least of the significant features in this passage is that two of Kieran’s reasons are frequently discredited by Hudson Link students and alumni. There are several occasions in my observational data where I was told that “parole doesn’t know you have a degree until you’re sitting in front of them”, that “parole doesn’t care about college”, and that “parole is decided on the nature of the crime, which never changes, no matter how much you might have changed as a person in the last two decades” (4 September and 25 September 2009). In fact some of the most internally celebrated Hudson Link alumni went up for parole during my fieldwork period and were denied.

Further, one of the most discussed topics among released alumni was their difficulty gaining employment because so many application forms ask whether the applicant has ever been convicted of a felony. According to New York State Human Rights Law Article 15, it is illegal to discriminate against a job applicant because of his criminal record, yet the reality is that this type of discrimination is both very prevalent and very difficult to prove (Joliat and Lee, 2007). Indeed many alumni reported that because of their records they had at least once been passed over for a job in favour of an applicant with less education. Several had stories of job interviews that had gone exceptionally well up until the point where they disclosed their felony convictions. “After that the interviewer doesn’t even want to make eye contact with you,” one alumnus reported (15 January 2010). The limited impact of the college degree

on parole and employment is no secret within the world of Hudson Link; it is openly discussed in their public forums, perhaps in order to prepare the men and encourage them to maintain realistic expectations.

Kieran's justifications for college are not necessarily contradictory, nor are they mutually exclusive. Yet within the figured world of Hudson Link, there is a noteworthy tension between them. Kieran was one of the newer Hudson Link students in the workshop, so it may be that these data passages serve as an example of a new member of a figured world incorporating group values into his pre-existing mindset. His amount of time in the college programme certainly would not automatically signify the extent to which he had learned and committed himself to the values of the figured world. However, from analysis of my observational data, I believe Academic Coordinator Arlene Mohammed would have attributed Kieran's latter passage above to the naivety of an inmate early in both his sentence and his college career. Based on the evidently common knowledge that getting a degree has little or no effect on parole, I believe she would have said that with time, Kieran, like the many students before him, would eventually come to a new understanding of his reasons for pursuing college. He would realise, Hudson Link insiders would say, that the tangible benefits of college inside would not be enough to get him through the difficulties and obstacles that lay ahead. He would have to want an education for its own sake, as he seemed to express – or experiment with expressing – in his “First Day of School” piece.

Paul had only been in prison a year when he joined the writing workshop, making him one of the college programme's newest students. His writing too displays a certain tension between the meaning he made of education before prison and the way he now thinks about it in relation to his future. Paul gave one of the most unflaggingly positive descriptions of what college would do for him, even if it was not clear exactly how.

*College is the **foundation of my tomorrow**. I am a convicted felon – not an acceptable truth. I cannot stand the title as **an employer will not as well**. College **will save my future** to do something positive. College is a **social prerequisite**, people do not respect an uneducated person. To find one who is indifferent to college is like trying to find an employer who cares less you've been in Sing Sing Correctional Facility for the last two decades. Having a degree says I am serious about being a useful part of **advancing society**. I wish for my new titles to go away; College may*

*change that. The experience of College **will enrich** my resolve. I **will accept** whatever work needs to be done. I am open to the belief that each person has something special. I **will try** hard and learn a great deal about College and myself. I settled for less than my best. I **will not** now. There is nothing more special than being your best at all times. Only College can bring me to that place mentally that **will raise** my spirits, goals, and emotions. I cannot accept my past, but I am here **to live another day. Tomorrow** can be brighter than the sun's rays. I have to by my absolute best.*

*College is the opportunity to explore and grow beyond. **Tomorrow will be** better, it's the most hopeful thing to live for and it cannot happen unless one believes in an academic forum of higher learning. **Today is tomorrow's future**. Reap what you sow. You only get what you give. The aforementioned are clichés, but it gives us the right to dream and **dreams have a tendency to become reality when believed**.*

(Paul, Why College, emphasis added)

This is Paul's first and only draft of this piece, and I have not edited or corrected it at all. Therefore I feel assured in pointing out that references to the future are the most prominent themes of this piece, a message that is achieved both through its subject matter as well as Paul's textual choices. His use of the future tense, highlighted above in bold, as well as his repeated references to "tomorrow" position his answer to the prompt, "Why College?" as one oriented almost entirely toward future possibilities. The phrase "social prerequisite" implies a future task for which one must work to qualify. The claim that "dreams have a tendency to become reality when believed" indicates long-term plans that Paul hopes to accomplish in the future, and feels he can as long as he "believes in an academic forum of higher learning". The connection between higher education and Paul's envisioned future could not be clearer when this piece is read on its own.

What we miss by reading the piece in isolation, however, is the way in which Paul's positive tone is such a great contrast to his attitude towards education in *all* of his other writing. In his "First Day of School" piece, Paul wrote:

Unfortunately, the best part of school was preparing for it. On the outside school is nice, but on the inside horrible students, and impatient teachers. Today I reflect and see an absolutely amazing parallel to school and prison. The children who were horrible still are and the teachers now wear uniforms and are still impatient. In addition the teachers are violent and so are the children. The only change about me was preparation...I expected this school to be the way it is.

(Paul, First Day of School)

The word “teachers” in the second half of this passage refers to the corrections officers, and “children” to Paul’s fellow inmates, playing with metonymy in the same way Cameron did with the phrase “permanent record” in Chapter 5. Paul elaborated in his later writing on why school was such a bad experience for him, explaining that despite being strong in spelling and text decoding, he struggled with reading comprehension.

The resource room was the place I was sent to for help with my reading comprehension problem. I was learning disabled according to the teachers there. To attend the resource room I had to leave regular class for a while. When I returned, my peers were merciless with insults to me and the other special education children. A popular insult was “retard room!” ...

...All of those feelings from grade school reminds me of my situation now: An undeserved title of prisoner, correction officers that are in need of correcting themselves. If not for the condescending teachers, harassment from my peers I would not have been ready for prison.

(Paul, Final Memoir)

Here Paul makes another comparison between school and prison, between guards and teachers, between classmates and fellow inmates. It is hard to believe that the last two passages were written by the same man who also proclaimed, “College is the foundation of my tomorrow”.

The “Why College” assignment was the only occasion on which Paul had written about higher education until his final memoir further explored his previous experiences with college. Being placed on the vocational (as opposed to college preparatory) track in high school, his one “academic” class per day was a course in criminal justice with a teacher he loved. Of his decision to go to college (on the outside, before his arrest) despite being classified as a vocational student, Paul wrote:

It was between challenging myself with the trumpet and being written-off as a trade student that opened my eyes and mind to higher learning. I learned on my own about this test called the “SAT’S” that all college hopefuls must take before their admittance to the institution of higher learning. I did well enough that I was accepted to John Jay College of Criminal Justice. The system of education is not equal for all students. If you are thought to be college material the school trains the student and prepares them for college. The underachiever is assigned a trade because they seemingly cannot do what the better student can do. Even if it were true that I was not

college material I was upset not to have a choice. I had to make college happen through my own fruition, and it hurt in more ways than one when I flunked out of John Jay. Despite failing out of John Jay, I continued on to community college. I used my trade to obtain a job and pay for college until I achieved; I got a two-year degree. The degree felt like a consolation prize and by the time I got it I conceded defeat. I am not college material...music off.

(Paul, Final Memoir)

For all the many apologies Paul made over the course of the workshop for not having cleaner technical writing abilities, the emotional crescendo of beating the odds only to later “concede defeat” is a dramatic and powerful use of his position as narrator. This weighty passage also marks the end of the only piece in which Paul engaged with the idea of being or not being “college material”. He did not revisit the themes from his “Why College” essay, or reconcile the final sentence, “I am not college material...music off”, with a revised view of himself based on his current participation in higher education.

I cannot say with certainty whether it is significant that the two writers whose essays revealed the greatest tension in terms of attitude towards education were two of the newest students to the programme. Cain (1991) found that the longer an interviewee had been a member of Alcoholics Anonymous, the closer his personal story adhered to the A.A. model, but my sense is that this explanation is too simplistic for the prison college context (and perhaps for Alcoholics Anonymous as well). Membership within figured worlds cannot be measured by such direct, almost positivist correlations, as learning to make meaning of one’s experiences in a certain way is not based on time but rather on engagement and commitment. I don’t know whether Kieran would eventually reject the perceived but unrealistic tangible rewards of college participation, nor whether Paul would come to a more nuanced view of college that integrated his lifelong experience. Note also that Paul is the first and only student in the dataset to use the word “undeserved” in describing his incarceration; even Chris, who maintained his innocence, made a point of saying that his lifestyle had contributed to his unfortunate circumstances. Again we cannot say if continued participation in the college programme would bring Paul to a different understanding of what he ‘deserved’. Nonetheless I believe that if asked their opinion, most members of the figured world of Hudson Link, both students and staff, would predict those outcomes.

It is also worth noting that there is another figured world whose norms seem to have influenced the values seen here – that of American higher education in general. The idea of using college to achieve a ‘bright future’ is an element not just of Hudson Link’s narrative, but of the national narrative of higher education as well. For example, in a recent speech American President Barack Obama told a crowd of college students assembled in Denver, Colorado that “college isn’t just one of the best investments you can make in your future. It’s one of the best investments you can make in *our* future” (Obama, 26 October 2011). The remarkable thing about finding such an idea present in the Hudson Link context may actually be the fact that the members of the figured world have managed to sustain this hopeful message despite their harsh, largely negative surroundings.

This section has explored writing data indicating the messages students received through participation in Hudson Link about the value of education to their future lives. Rather than approach the worth of a college degree as a given, we must problematise the assumed value in order to see it for what it is: a value communicated and lived out through the activities of the figured world of Hudson Link. Writing data show that this meaning both shapes and is shaped by the experiences that students bring with them to the context.

7.3 Preventing History from Repeating Itself

Another way that students engaged with their ideas about college and the future was through the notion of learning from the past to avoid making the same mistakes again. Three strong expressions of this idea led me to wonder whether it might be a feature of the figured world. Analysis of both the writing and observational data indicate that it may.

Graham wrote about history repeating itself in the most explicit terms. In several of his assignments, he expressed the belief that while he had always been extremely “smart”, he may actually have been too smart for his own good. He started “acting up”, Graham said, once he began believing that there was nothing anyone could teach him. He began to explore this idea in his “Why College” piece:

It's ironic that I never passed a history class in high school, because I know that those who don't know their history are doomed to repeat it. When I was young, my father came to prison for something he says he didn't do. Two decades later I came to prison for an act I didn't physically commit. Me! The super genius. Mr. Smarter than thou! Einstein 2.0 for Pete's sake. In prison for something I didn't even do? See, I was so smart I never had to commit crimes. I had a crew of lunatics who would do anything I tell them. See? I told you I was smart. Of course the police were just a little bit smarter. When they arrested me, I said the jacket²⁵ didn't fit. A detective told me not to worry about that because he knew a good tailor. True to his word, he altered the case to make it fit like it was custom made for me. And here I am, 12 years later, doing time for something stupid that I didn't even do.

(Graham, Why College)

The repeating history that Graham refers to in the first sentence is not just that he and his father were both incarcerated, but that neither took responsibility for the crimes they had been accused of. The aspect of his father's incarceration to which he drew a parallel – in which he saw history repeating itself – actually seemed to be his guiltless attitude regarding his actions and subsequent punishment. Graham later revisited the motif of being “smart”, demonstrating in the following example its worthlessness when it came to defending himself during his trial.

My history was used against me (I had previously been arrested for violence and guns) at what they called a trial but I saw as a circus. When the circus ended, it was obvious that I didn't do what they said I did, but it was also clear that I did a lot of bad things in my time. And it wasn't hard for the smart district attorney to convince twelve people who weren't as smart as me that I had done something and should be put in prison.

(Graham, Final Memoir)

He even went so far as to devalue the quality of being “smart” by applying the descriptor to the district attorney, who Graham seemed to imply was complicit in the detective's successful attempt to frame him. This time, however, he went on to answer his earlier question of how to keep history from repeating itself by demonstrating the change his attitude had undergone in the last twelve years.

²⁵ The term “jacket” refers to a *case jacket*, or a file containing the details of a criminal case.

Don't think I'm complaining. I don't do that because even though they got me under the wrong label, I know in my heart I earned my prison time. And truthfully, my time here was for society's benefit because I was by all accounts a menace.

(Graham, Final Memoir)

In addition to a realisation of what being “smart” could and couldn’t do for him, he revealed a complete change in the amount of responsibility he took for his incarceration. Instead of being outraged by an unjust conviction, Graham accepted that he was a “menace”, and that his own attitude was in need of an adjustment. He demonstrated to the reader that he had learned from his past mistakes and no longer had the same misguided perspective as his father or his former self.

In the final portion of his memoir, Graham finally rejected the earlier importance he placed on being “smart”, writing:

I wasted years of my life chasing smoke and mirrors, destroying my own community, and terrorizing others. I was smart enough to be the King of New York, but I wasn't smart enough to know that it was a short-lived career. Looking back, I could've used my math skills to pursue a career in accounting. The way I brought out the best (and worst) in people, I could have been an entrepreneur. With my scientific understanding, I wouldn't excelled as a chemical engineer. Heck, my disregard for human life could've led me to become a military hero. But I was too smart for all that: I wanted to be a gangster. Pretty smart, huh?

(Graham, Final Memoir)

Through his ironic depiction of himself and his actions as “smart”, Graham showed that he had learned a more appropriate way of thinking about his past. The trajectory that he now envisioned for himself, which will be explored in detail in Section 7.4, helped him learn from his mistakes and go forward “using intelligence instead of smarts”. In learning from his history, Graham believed, it would not have a chance to repeat itself.

In analysing my observational data I realised that Graham’s writing was not the only narrative in which I had heard the theme of history repeating itself. In the 2009 graduation speech referred to earlier, the valedictorian started by describing himself as a young man who, like Graham, thought he already knew it all: “I was walking around with a chip on my shoulder. Thinking no one could teach me anything, I was very much a punk and a cocaine

addict.” Then, as in Graham’s essay, the valedictorian touched on the importance of learning from history: “George Santayana said that those who forget history are doomed to repeat it. I never want to repeat my history. We as prisoners have long thought that having a record was a strike against us, but I suggest that it can be a blessing as well. We will be reminded of where we have been and our past will be foremost in our minds.” He too engaged with the idea of how the past – and importantly, how the appropriate sensemaking of that past – would benefit him and the other men in their future lives. Again, I show the similarities in these narratives not to indicate that one was a replication or appropriation of the other, but to demonstrate the kinds of values and understandings at work within Hudson Link.

Kenneth was another student who chose to show how he had learned from his past experiences, which in his case were two previous attempts at a college degree. Discussing his decision to leave college the second time, he wrote:

In all sincerity I really did want to finish school, but to be honest I did more partying than studying. In the summer of 89, I came home for summer break, met this real pretty young lady named Karin, and the rest they say is history. So here I am at Sing Sing Correctional Facility and for the third time giving it the “old college try”. Now I know what you’re thinking and seriously I don’t blame you for thinking that way, but you ask me Why College? and my answer to you is this, there’s no way in hell I’m going to do all this time and not benefit from it. Integrating back into society is not going to be easy for me, all the odds will be stacked up against me, so I’ll have to have some type of advantage to keep me in the game. Some type of leverage, something tangible, something with substance, something to minimize the odds and the only way I can see that happening is if I leave this god forsaken place in a sound mind, physically fit, and with a college degree. I been known in my time for going up against some pretty strong adversities and coming out victorious, defeat has no place in my life and I refuse to die while I’m still living.

(Kenneth, Why College)

Kenneth’s reasons for going to college clearly centered on the future task of “integrating back into society”. Yet this passage shows that even in thinking about the future Kenneth was still making sense of the past, in the way he directly addresses the reader to say of his current third attempt at college: “Now I know what you’re thinking and seriously I don’t blame you for thinking that way,” he wrote. I was genuinely uncertain as to what Kenneth believed I was “thinking” as I read his story; from context I assume he thought I would expect him drop out of college this time too. Instead, he proclaimed his readiness to finally conquer not only

college, but also the difficult task of re-entry that awaited him upon his release. In this passage Kenneth very demonstrably vowed not to let his history with college repeat itself.

Finally, Ryan also hinted at the way in which he had tried to learn from his past mistakes to create a new and different future life. Though his wording of this concept was less explicit than Graham's, his example was still very powerful because it dealt directly with his thinking about pursuing college inside. In his final memoir, which was discussed previously in Chapter 6, Ryan wrote about how his earlier experience with college in prison ended when he was put into the Solitary Housing Unit (SHU) for having \$100 in cash. Reflecting on why he continued to hustle drugs on the yard even while enrolled in college, Ryan explained:

I lived for the benefits of the moment and the possibility of making a few dollars. If I'd been honest I'd have admitted that I couldn't see myself with a degree. So getting a degree wasn't something I dreamed of or felt would make a difference in my life. While I found the classes interesting, enjoyed learning new information and even used some of it to analyze my behavior, there wasn't an end in sight. I guess I didn't have a plan where college was concerned, let alone a goal. I was just going, which made sense since my early years in school ended much the same way.

(Ryan, Final Memoir)

Much of Ryan's explanation for why college did not work for him the first time hinged on the idea that "there wasn't an end in sight" – that not believing he was capable of finishing college and lacking a perceived trajectory on which it could take him was the reason he could not see it through to completion. When looked at in relation to the text that follows, the above passage serves as the 'Before' of a 'Before and After' type of comparison, as Ryan's trip to SHU became the setting for the plot device of an 'aha!' moment.

...I looked at my life and wondered if it wasn't time to stop lying to myself. What had I really gotten from my actions? What could I look forward to? More of the same, I figured, and I didn't like the ending I saw. Maybe the benefits of the moment weren't that important. After all, my latest benefit of \$100 got me sixty days in SHU. But what else could I do? The benefits of crime were how I survived an abusive home, the streets and juvenile facilities, as well as jail and prison.

It wouldn't be easy to let go of things that once enabled me to survive, but in order to live I had to at least try. I had to kick crime to the curb and learn to live as

opposed to just surviving. The time to think and the loss of the college program allowed me to see how important a degree could be. If I were going to give up on crime, I'd need something to replace it with. It wasn't as if I could fall back on my past experience since that was mostly criminal. I figured that a formal education, if nothing else, was a step away from what I was leaving behind – crime – and that was a good enough start since I wasn't sure where I was headed.

(Ryan, Final Memoir)

Whereas in the previous passage Ryan described his attitude as one concerned with “the benefits of *the moment*”, his new frame of mind encouraged him to consider what he had to “look *forward* to”. This time, he would believe in his ability to finish college and get to a more positive place, even though he couldn't see what that future would look like. He would learn from his past to avoid his old behaviours and their consequences.

Ryan's memoir depicted a man making sense of his past experiences in relation to his intentions for the future. Yet we must not forget that though this story is told in ‘Before and After’ format, the entire account was written *after* Ryan's described change of attitude. Given that this narrative was constructed after the fact, it seems reasonable to conclude that Ryan, as an alumnus and student leader, displayed some of the figured world's integral ideas – ideas that are created and maintained by him and members like him. Learning from his mistakes and preventing his history from repeating itself seemed to be central themes in Ryan's writing. The narratives of Kenneth and Graham, as well as that of the class valedictorian, may be further evidence of the extent of these ideas.

7.4 Trajectory

The writing prompts I created for the workshop most easily leant themselves to stories about the past, so the information students provided about their trajectories – about what they saw when they envisioned the future – was somewhat limited to generalities. Many of the data passages highlighted in this chapter thus far have dealt with the idea, for example, of looking forward to having ‘a future’. Others referred to students pursuing college in order to contribute to society after their eventual release from prison. Two workshop students in particular went a step further in revealing the relationship between higher education and their future plans through concrete descriptions of their perceived trajectories.

Both Chris and Graham engaged with their ideas about the future through descriptions of the specific ways in which they hoped to contribute to society. Graham wrote:

I'm currently enrolled in Mercy College where I hope to get my Bachelors in Behavioral Science and eventually move on to the New York Theological Seminary and get a Masters in Professional Studies. My experiences and what I've learned from them will help me to deter kids from following my path. I've wasted much of my time and smarts, but if I can prevent kids from doing what I did, then I can make the most of what little time and smarts I have left. That way, I'd be using intelligence instead of smarts and power instead of physical strength.

(Graham, Final Memoir)

Graham saw the lessons he had learned through his “experiences” – which I take to mean both his learning experiences outside of school as well as the formal education listed in the first sentence – as the requisite tools for finding a way to deter young people from following the same path that he did. In positioning college this way, he not only made sense of his situation in terms of what he intended to do in the future, but also found a use for the negative things that had already happened in his life. As in Section 5.5 there is the idea that Graham would not be able to succeed in a meaningful way today had he not experienced his past, however difficult it might have been.

Chris’s writing displayed a similar trajectory of wanting to “give back”, but these intentions featured an even bigger role in his writing. The first time he engaged with his ideas about the future, Chris wrote:

Why college? Because as a prisoner I owe a civic duty to my community. Upon my release, I will now have something to offer society. I will be able to offer the wisdom I have acquired during my term of imprisonment. I can offer my newly acquired social skills imbedded by my rigorous study in the fields of Sociology and Psychology.

College has opened a gateway of understanding, character, and discipline. These are attributes I didn't have prior to incarceration. College opened my mind to new ways of being a productive member of my family, community, and society. I am now a caring, loving, and responsible son, father, and husband who offers adequate advice to my family. I am often looked upon as a makeshift counselor among my peers behind these walls of oppression. And in society, I will give the youth an open ear, with quality advice and conducive alternatives to the negative environment and characteristics they are being exposed to in their urban dwellings.

(Chris, Why College)

In my written feedback to this piece I asked Chris if he could “show” this rather than “tell” it, specifically the part about being a “makeshift counselor”. The memoir that followed later in the workshop, discussed earlier in Section 7.2, depicted his work with at-risk teenagers in the Youth Assistance Program. The conclusion to that memoir reads as follows:

In prison, I have found that I enjoy helping others – especially at-risk youth. Armed with a bachelor’s degree in Behavioral Science, upon my release, I will be in a better position to enter the social [service] field, and make myself accessible to those in need of counseling and guidance. My main goal in life is to begin a non-profit organization that addresses the needs of children in urban environments. I would like to give special attention to the children of incarcerated parents.

I have raised two children from prison. I have watched them suffer. I have seen them yearning for guidance and attention – for a male role model to show them how to handle manly situations that occur in life. I have always wished that someone would come into our lives and save my sons from the cold world they have been exposed to. It took me over a decade of harsh realities to realize that my circumstances in life are grooming me to be that savior for others.

(Chris, Final Memoir)

Still valuing strength in the face of obstacles – and perhaps anticipating a struggle upon release – Chris imagined his future self “*armed with a bachelor’s degree*” yet using this strength for a higher purpose than he might have in the past. This passage calls to mind Maruna’s (1997: 85-86) analysis of the “generativity script” (McAdams, 1993) often found at the conclusion of published redemption narratives, discussed earlier in Chapter 3: “almost all of the narrators emphasize the desire to ‘give something back’ to others who may not have been as fortunate as they were...Frequently, the recipient of this care is young people who are in situations similar to those the narrator experienced as a youth.” What is special about the plan to “give something back” expressed in Graham’s and Chris’s narratives is the fact that both writers attributed the ability to do so to their experiences in higher education. This also develops the previous work on the role of the future in redemption narratives (Maruna, 2004; Paternoster and Bushway, 2009; Gardner, 2010) by investigating the component parts of these trajectories and looking at their development by individuals engaged in group activity within a specific sociocultural context.

Nor is the desire to “give back” a foreign idea within the figured world of the prison college, according to my observational data. In the graduation speech mentioned in Sections 7.2 and 7.3, Hudson Link’s 2009 valedictorian declared, “I have a vision for a future full of prospects, the ability to think critically – to see the bigger picture – a deepened ability to love myself, others, my wife and family. A passion to improve, to achieve, a desire to help others reach their goals. And an overarching desire to give back to society, to become a positive, galvanizing influence on the world.” The day this speech was given was my first day in the field, and I have no way of knowing if Chris and Graham were in attendance that day. However I quote the speech to show not the source of their ideas, but that the act of turning around to help others is considered a cherished responsibility within the figured world of the prison college.

7.5 Closing Remarks

The data in this chapter engage the ways that students think about the role of higher education in their future lives. As with members of any figured world, their ideas and understandings come from a variety of sources both inside and outside the prison college context. Rather than attempt to show some sort of causal relationship between the various viewpoints, the data in this chapter can contribute to an understanding of the ways that students’ own ideas both shape and find shape in the values of a figured world.

Section 7.1 explored the attitudes that students reported from before their participation in the Hudson Link programme, including visions of college as either a prerequisite for or a vehicle to the world of work and careers. These data extend our understanding of how their early ideas about education, highlighted earlier in Section 5.1, might be brought to bear on the prison college context. It seems likely that Hudson Link’s messages about the future value of college may have resonated easily with some participants precisely *because* they so resembled their previously held understandings. Writing data also revealed the ways in which the retrospective accounts of their decision-making processes may have been influenced by the norms of the world they have come to value so highly.

Section 7.2 looked at students' expressions of what higher education had taught them about the value of college to the future – and further, to the concept of 'having a future'. This understanding appears to be a figurative one that Hudson Link members may appropriate both from their own context and from the programme dialogue about the value of higher education. Section 7.2 also explores the ways that some of the newer programme members seem to be incorporating Hudson Link values and understandings into their own conceptions about the personal worth of a college education.

Several students specifically positioned college as a tool to help them keep history from repeating itself. In learning from previous mistakes, they explained, they could take an active role in changing the trajectory of the future specifically so that it would not resemble their pasts. Section 7.3 looked at the presence of this theme in the written narratives of three students in the programme, as well as a graduation speech that likely acted as just one of many opportunities students are given to model this and other privileged understandings.

In Section 7.4, student writing data revealed some of the specific trajectories that students imagined for themselves and showed how they attributed those visions for the future to their participation in the prison college programme. These trajectories resemble many of those found in the final portions of what related research with prisoners refers to as "redemption narratives" (Maruna, 2004). These trajectories are unique, however, in the way that they attribute both their desire and their ability to "give something back" to their participation in higher education.

Hudson Link students make sense of the future by viewing their pursuit of a college degree as the basis of a trajectory they can find peace with. Collectively, sections 7.1 through 7.4 demonstrate the various ways that they "experience the future," though unlike in Engeström's (2007) study the gap between design and implementation is bridged not in pursuit of a coconfigured customer service, but in a coconfigured transformation of self.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Here one moment, gone the next.

-Francis

The doctoral research contained within these pages was designed to discover how incarcerated undergraduates use higher education to make sense of their lives. I asked how students pursuing college degrees in a highly unusual institutional context used the resources offered to them through the construction and practice of new identities. I asked how these identities, acting as new subject positions within the figured worlds of the prison college and the prison itself, guided students' thinking about their past experiences and their hopes for the future. I asked how membership in the figured world of the prison college shaped and was shaped by the sensemaking undertaken there.

The conceptual framework of the inquiry was based on the deceptively simple premise that context matters. The efforts of students in the college programme at Sing Sing had to be understood on their terms, from their own semiotic perspectives and through the sociocultural lenses of particular social worlds. I investigated these efforts from inside the context of Hudson Link, which I conceptualised as a figured world, building on the work of Holland *et al.* (1998) in order to locate and understand the ways that members of that world would support, negotiate, and challenge its features.

In my writing workshops students produced the meanings they were assigning to their experiences and the identities they were constructing through their participation in a variety of figured worlds, including but not limited to the prison college. In analysing the student writing in the context of the observational data, I was able to uncover how they used the tools available to them as members of Hudson Link to construct the educational narratives they lived for themselves as well as projected, through writing, for me. These narratives, the multiple identities embedded within them, and the behaviour they inspired afforded their authors agency, enabling them to act in anticipation of compelling imagined futures. My findings not only make an original contribution to the field of prison education but also to the

field of education more generally. I will address each of these contributions in turn. Suggestions for further research will then be offered.

8.1 Progress Within the Field of Prison Education

As mentioned in Chapter 2, scholars in the field of prison education have long called for studies that could develop our understanding of what actually goes on when the incarcerated go to school. This is a question both of motivation and of how adults pursuing higher education inside prison think about their own participation. It is also a question of the processes of higher education and of how prison college students engage with those processes. The timing of this research makes it a particularly necessary contribution considering the historic context in which it was produced. At a time when the lack of government support as well as the exorbitant cost of corrections have forced many prisons to cut their educational programming, it is likely that more and more of the postsecondary opportunities offered in correctional facilities will be facilitated by external organisations like Hudson Link.

The findings presented in Chapter 5 centred on the way that the workshop writers considered their past experiences in light of their present circumstances. This study's conceptualisation of experience began with Dewey (1938), who theorised that our understanding of the past shapes our stance towards the present and expectations for the future. But my analysis went further by looking at how students' sensemaking about these experiences might have been guided by context-dependent meanings and values. The men's understandings of the past shaped and were shaped by resources available within the figured world of the prison college, from academic coursework to messages modelled on a social level by other student and faculty members. According to the Deweyan (1916) goal of education, students should always be learning to reinterpret past experiences in light of new information. Incarcerated students have pasts that weigh heavily on their current circumstances. The findings of Chapter 5 therefore make an important contribution to the field of prison education by demonstrating the importance of dealing with those experiences in order to make way for a new identity based on something other than criminal history.

Experience also played a crucial role in the findings presented in Chapter 6, in which students used the tools offered and the processes modelled within the figured world of Hudson Link to incorporate the new dimension of *college student* as they reconstructed their identities. The conceptual framework of the study indicates that we build and project identity narratives that draw on our histories-in-person but which are also based in part on the realms in which we currently operate. Analysis demonstrated that Hudson Link students did this through noting changes in their attitudes and perspectives while still incorporating what they perceived to be lifelong aspects of their identities. This lent narrative believability and consistency and thus made the stories of transformation all the more powerful. The men also validated their new roles as college students through the ways they had learned to express themselves within that context. I spent little time in the company of non-student inmates at Sing Sing, so it was sometimes easy to forget the distinctive nature of their discourse as compared with the rest of the prison. Yet their use of language was markedly different, and analysis indicated that those differences were deliberate. Chapter 6 demonstrates that the most important gains made through college education may not be mastery of the coursework, but instead the student's re-organised perception of himself achieved through active participation in that coursework and his actions in response to that perception. This finding is significant to the field of prison education, especially postsecondary correctional education, where the academic skills and gains of incarcerated students are often assumed to be the most important activity and end goal. The importance of looking beyond mastery of coursework or accumulation of skills may also apply to higher education more broadly, in ways that will be explored further in Section 8.3.

The findings presented in Chapter 7 advance the prison education field by demonstrating that the tangible usefulness of the college degree itself is not the only, or even the most significant contribution that college makes to students' lives. The data in Chapter 7 demonstrated the way that by *experiencing the future* – living and acting 'as if' in regards to their imagined trajectories – students effectively enacted those very trajectories in which they stayed out of disciplinary segregation while incarcerated, and stayed out of prison after their release. Therefore the future trajectory in which incarcerated students envision themselves as

college graduates may be as important to their success as the degree they get for their efforts. It is working towards the qualification, rather than the qualification itself, that allows them to create the very futures they imagine.

This finding is especially important because the perceived usefulness of college can seem so obvious that it often goes unpacked. Even the men found it odd when I pressed them on why they believed they needed college for, as Kenneth phrased it, “any type of career”. Surely I as a graduate student had to understand and accept the value they placed on education. It was not that I did not accept or agree with it – the importance of college for a future career is a major component of the American public narrative about education and is a message that I myself heard many times growing up. As Karabel (2007) explains, “Americans are committed to the belief that everyone, no matter how humble his origins, has a chance to rise to the top. Our leading colleges and universities play a pivotal role in this national narrative, for they are considered major pathways to power and privilege.” However, the Hudson Link context is no standard higher education environment. The programme operates within a maximum-security prison, where many American social narratives – certainly the optimistic variety in which people “rise to the top” – no longer apply. How could this idea be so steadily maintained by the individuals in this environment?

Indeed what this study has displayed quite strongly is the central role of cohesive group narratives in an effort like Hudson Link’s. The figured world of the prison college – maintained by a shared understanding of what the men are doing when they go to the second floor of the school building – is absolutely crucial to the Hudson Link effort. For it is not a school, but a maximum-security prison. Outside of the classroom spaces, the only evidence that Hudson Link members are college students or graduates is their own knowledge of it and the acknowledgment by other inmates also enrolled in classes that they are part of a shared endeavour. They receive no special treatment, few extra privileges, and certainly no change of scenery from the rest of the inmates on their housing blocks; in fact, many are met only with hostility for exuding what others perceive as an attitude of being, as Jonathan phrased it, “the elites” of the prison.

What the men do as part of Hudson Link ‘counts’ as college only because everyone involved in its execution recognises it as such: the facility has given them rooms at predetermined times for use as college classrooms; the accrediting institution will award degrees to those men who complete the required amount of activity in the context; all the other men are there undertaking the same activities with same goals in mind. Unlike the average university student, Hudson Link members must sustain an idea of the future that is largely incongruous with the greater prison setting and the operative narratives found within it. Perhaps it is no surprise that I encountered so many public displays of Hudson Link’s tools for sensemaking and identity reconstruction, as well as hopeful messages about the future. Projecting these aspects of the narrative must be an important part of committing to and internalising it.

That question brings us to a significant contribution made by synthesising the findings of all three data chapters combined: the importance and necessity of group activity to the success of incarcerated men pursuing positive outcomes through higher education. This is a particularly salient issue because scholars within the field of prison education have been wondering for some time if distance education might be a viable option for increasing incarcerated adults’ access to academic programming. This question will be asked even more frequently now that some corrections officials are experimenting with bringing technology to their facilities, such as monitored email accounts for those incarcerated in the federal system. From this study alone I can make no claim that distance education couldn’t be a useful alternative where programmes like Hudson Link were implausible, perhaps due to a shortage of funding or teachers. Disciplined students without special educational needs who have the financial resources to pursue distance education may well be able to work through academic material on their own. The value of autodidacticism, highlighted in Chapter 6, could even suggest that there is a market for such distance initiatives. Yet while incarcerated adults might be able to engage with the academic side of higher education, my findings question the likelihood of success when individuals pursue such self-administered programmes alone, without the benefit of identity work undertaken in concert with others. Without the features

of Hudson Link that make it a figured world, it is hard to imagine that so many students would complete their degrees and successfully re-integrate into society.

8.2 What Writing Did and How It Did It

Others have used approaches somewhat similar to mine, providing both useful starting points and ample opportunities for expansion. Urrieta, Martin, & Robinson's (2011) study of North Carolina's Youth Offender Program analysed interview and survey data and conceptualised the prison college as a figured world to explore identity construction therein. Wilson (2000) examined how prisoners in the United Kingdom created a third space, contesting institutional standards and positioning through literacy activities. What distinguishes my study, conceptually and methodologically, is the way that my understanding of prisoner engagement with higher education used students' narrative writing in order to gain insight into their identity and agency in the negotiation of the figured world. In this way my approach was more Vygotskian and cultural-historical in orientation in that it has accounted for the mediating function of language in the development of higher mental functions – or consciousness – rather than seeking to understand the relationships between language and situation. Nonetheless, the central role that writing played in this inquiry warrants consideration of, to borrow Bazerman and Prior's (2004) phrasing, *what writing did and how it did it*. Though autobiography was initially chosen for methodological reasons, the theoretical implications of treating student writing as data crucially shaped this study's direction and findings. Reflection on the implications for analysis and subsequent conclusions will demonstrate this further.

Methodologically, writing was a valuable research tool as this study was carried out in an environment that would not have permitted, for security reasons, electronic tape recorders or other memory aids. The small-group workshop format facilitated trust and rapport with the students. Even more importantly, working collaboratively on the joint construction of their final memoirs helped me better understand both the autobiographical self and the discursal self of each student as an individual. Speaking one-on-one with them

about what they were trying to do with their writing allowed me to understand the kind of story and kind of self they wanted to create when they created themselves autobiographically.

Writing was just as important from a theoretical perspective. Single-session interviews would have come to represent the students too simply and one-dimensionally, standing in for their seemingly definitive ideas rather than acting as a snapshot of one moment in time. One advantage of a dataset like mine, containing several pieces of writing that participants constructed over an extended period of time, is that it captured rather than ignored the many contradictions inherent within those purportedly singular identities. The focus was on process, rather than product. This format gave students a chance not just to remember parts of their stories they may have initially left out, but focus less on presenting one perfectly cohesive narrative of their education and more on exploring different dimensions of their memories and experiences.

My work is similar to Ivanic's (1998) in that it explores the relationship between identity and written discourse in an educational context. I looked not only at what students said when they asserted their identities, but also at *how* they said it, using texts they constructed at my request. In analysing these texts I had to attend to my understanding of the authors who wrote them (autobiographical self), the identities and meanings that those authors wanted to convey (discoursal self), and the influence of the context in which they were created (self as author). My decision to use *self as author* to explore semiotic mediation within Hudson Link expanded Ivanic's framework to include conceptualisation of the educational setting as a figured world. Rather than see the use of academic language as evidence of student knowledge being marginalised or delegitimised, I asked how members of this world *opted into* the use of academic discourse in order to develop agency through contesting their institutionally designated identities. Furthermore, the analysis was multi-directional; in addition to examining how student discourse and sensemaking were shaped by the prison college, the figured world concept allowed me to consider the ways that student participation influenced, supported, or challenged the features of that world for future generations of students. Their written narratives served as cultural tools in the identity work that they undertook as members of the figured world of Hudson Link.

8.3 Higher Education and the Prison College

According to sociocultural theory, with the importance it places on meaning making within specific contexts, a prison college student would have a much different experience of higher education than a student on a university campus. However many of the findings displayed in the data analysis chapters show students engaging with higher education in ways that are not so different at all from ‘regular’ students. For example, the promise of a brighter future through higher education is a pervasive narrative in contemporary American society, despite the current economic climate and the difficult employment search facing even jobseekers with specialised graduate degrees. Likewise, many Hudson Link students have graduated, perhaps even gone on to attain their Master’s degree, only to find that the parole board is only interested in the nature of their original crimes, and that employers in the free world are unconvinced of their rehabilitation. Both these scenarios are well known within their respective figured worlds, yet the ‘bright future’ narrative endures. So how similar or different are the efforts of college students in prison?

I would argue that this question is part of what makes the prison college such a valuable context for studying the pursuit of higher education. Despite some starkly different features of the prison setting – issues of violence, redemption, and long-term isolation from society, just to name a few – it allows us to examine student motivation, effort, and sensemaking apart from the lenses of employment and social promotion. The re-entry process is undoubtedly somewhat easier for members of Hudson Link, if only because they have an existing social support network when they parole out. But for the most part, an incarcerated man’s environment does not markedly change because of his college degree – and *Hudson Link students know that*. Those who struggle with indeterminate release dates and subsequent employment despite their degrees, as well as those who graduate with a decade or more of their sentence left to serve, must understand a value of college education that is not directly tied to a tangible reward.

Instead, students’ writing demonstrates how strongly they believe in higher education’s powers of transformation, changing them on a fundamental level unrelated to their concrete skills or earning potential. By eliminating external factors like employment,

starting salary, and return on financial investment, we reduce the number of ‘variables’ on which to measure the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of higher education in a way that is much more difficult to do with traditional settings. Of education in the prison context, only two questions remain: Does participation in the prison college programme offer students something that is valuable in the short term? My data indicate that it does, through providing meaningful opportunities to reorganise and reinterpret their experiences and senses of self. Does participation in the prison college programme offer students something that is valuable in the long term? Considering that in the face of a 41% recidivism rate not a single Hudson Link graduate has been re-incarcerated on a new charge, I would argue that it does. Yet neither of the programme’s most important contributions are the sort of tangible markers of increased human capital that we would look for to evaluate undergraduate education in the ‘free’ world. The prison college context thus gives us an alternative approach to the possibilities and potential for higher education and the work students might be doing as they undertake it.

8.4 Student Empowerment versus Social Control

The focus on a brighter future in which Hudson Link students will not return to prison allows us to address a tension fundamental to education, and one that I believe has run throughout the entire length of this thesis: the potentially competing goals of student empowerment and social control. Does providing education in the prison setting empower students with the agency to control their own outcomes, or does it merely socialise them into easily governed ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1995)?

In many ways an engaged and committed Hudson Link member is not only the image of a model student, but a model prisoner as well: the incentive of continued participation acts as a motivator to stay out of trouble, and to keep trouble from starting around him; he functions as an effective advertisement for what appears to be the institution’s earnest effort at rehabilitation; and though he may not gain favourable treatment from officers, fellow prisoners, or the parole board, he can accept this because the experiences of others in the college programme have taught him to expect it. As reflected in so much of the language students used to speak and write about their incarceration, Hudson Link even seems to

provide the men with the institutionally and socially acceptable discourse with which to claim responsibility for their situations. When framed in these terms, it is difficult to see how education could be conceivably be seen as a form of resistance to the positioning the institution itself would choose for the men.

Yet the state-wide recidivism rate is 41%, and the justice system's punitive, retributive approach to opportunities for the incarcerated make it difficult to believe that corrections officials actually *want* anyone to achieve rehabilitation or successful re-entry. The lack of state support is even more basic than long-term concerns like housing and employment: on their release day, men are simply left at the local train station with \$40 in cash, a ticket to Grand Central Station, and instructions to report to their parole officer within 24 hours. It is almost a wonder that anyone manages to survive that first day of freedom. In contrast, Sean Pica meets released Hudson Link members outside the prison gate and brings them to his office, where they can pick up new or gently used clothing, including a business suit for job interviews. Released graduates receive a brand new laptop and basic computer training so that Sean can communicate with each of them via a daily email. Of course we cannot forget their zero percent re-incarceration rate, which speaks to their organisation's primary goal of "lower rates of recidivism, incarceration and poverty". In light of all this, how could a programme like Hudson Link be seen as anything other than a tool of student empowerment?

I believe the heart of the issue lies in the agency these men have in opting into or resisting the goals and discourse of this world once they have become members of the programme. To that end I would argue that students are not coerced to adopt the sensemaking processes we saw in Chapters 5 through 7. Of the hundred men enrolled in Hudson Link at any given time, there are many whose involvement does not extend beyond attendance in their classes, and who do not participate in the other available group activities where those processes are modelled and reinforced. Their enrolment in college and the awarding of their degrees does not depend on their social engagement with the programme. The extent to which students commit themselves to the identities and discourses found within this figured

world is their choice. The very existence of that choice demonstrates greater agentic potential than they have in the prison at large.

Both sides of the empowerment/control tension clearly exist within the efforts of the prison college and its students. What this emphasises is the question that must be asked of any such setting in which student empowerment is at issue: whose values inform the narrative identities that shape and are shaped by the educational environment. I believe that by focusing the way I did on the specific features of the Hudson Link context, rather than setting all postsecondary prison education programmes equal, those values and their influence were made explicit. Understanding the features of similar programmes should be centrally important to anyone looking to do research in or about such a setting. With that in mind I turn to suggestions for future directions in the field.

8.5 Limitations, Implications and Future Directions

The major limitation of my study is clearly its small sample size. I conducted this research with only one type of prison college provider: the external non-profit organisation, created in response to a lack of other opportunities and run by staff members who are authentic stakeholders by virtue of the fact that they are former prisoners themselves. Furthermore, the data were collected not just from one delivery model for higher education, but from one single programme, and a distinctive one at that. The narratives that appeared in the writing of the men in my study were crucially important to their day-to-day makings of a life, and were shaped in large part by the context in which they were constructed. So we must consider very carefully which of the findings in this study can be generalised to other prison education contexts.

We cannot expect to find Hudson Link narratives, constructed by and for this group of students at this point in time, in operation anywhere else. Having said that, I suspect that though their programme is undoubtedly unique in many ways, it is probably not so different from college initiatives run by external organisations in other prisons. While the narratives present within other programmes are likely to be based on different historical consciousness, I believe that observation of those settings would reveal powerful stories of their own.

Replicating this study in the educational contexts of other correctional settings would therefore be immensely useful in determining whether, as I have suggested, narratives are at work in those environments as well.

The changes in these important social narratives over time would also be an engaging subject for long-term study; for example, the ethos and operations of Hudson Link will inevitably change if and when Sean Pica, one of the programme's first graduates and a central figure in its shared organisational history, ever leaves his post as Executive Director. Investigating the evolving nature of the resultant narratives during and after that organisational change would be informative both to our understanding of how prison college programmes operate as well as how changing group dynamics affect organisations whose operations are so dependent on powerful narratives. I would also be extremely interested to know if postsecondary prison education provided by the correctional facilities themselves, rather than by outside organisations, would foster the development of figured worlds. If so, it would be fascinating to examine how members of those worlds negotiate their institutional identities using tools provided by the institution itself.

I also believe many future studies of prison education will reveal a number of features that transcend specific context to an even greater extent. This was a major conclusion from my time in the field, where I couldn't help but notice that despite the common social othering of prison inmates, people are much the same everywhere. Over the course of this project I have often thought that many of the issues Hudson Link students engaged with were the very same that I faced as a graduate student: the central question of identity, learning from experience by creating its meaning and bringing it to bear on future learning, even the extent to which academic discourse can oppress or uplift. And I am certain that a vision for the future, especially a hopeful one that could bring a sense of wholeness, purpose, and direction, is at work wherever there are human beings, incarcerated or otherwise, striving to 'better' themselves.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Take-home Prompt Assignment Sheet

Take-Home Work for Week 2

Please complete the following three tasks in preparation for our second session, which will take place on Tuesday, October 27th.

If the workload for your regular academic classes is particularly heavy this week, give priority to the writing exercise and do the reading only if you have time.

Reading

1. Excerpt from Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (pgs 1-8)
2. Excerpt from Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Writing

Prompt: Learning to Read

The topic of our second take-home writing exercise is "Learning to Read". Interpret this prompt in whatever way you find most intuitive and/or interesting.

Write as much or as little as you like. Just write until you feel you are done. Any format and style is fine as long as what you write is informed by your own experience.

Remember that these prompts are meant to provide you with lots of flexibility and room for creativity. When you tackle this week's prompt, think about the techniques we discussed in class and whether any of them might be useful to you in your own writing.

Bonus: Try your hand at writing your own six-word memoir.

Appendix B: Writing Workshop Optional Reading List

Week 1

- “The Sound of Your Voice” from William Zinsser’s *On Writing Well*
- “Writing About Yourself” from William Zinsser’s *On Writing Well*
- “Finding a Voice” from Eudora Welty’s *One Writer’s Beginnings*

Week 2

- Excerpt from Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (pgs 1-8)
- Excerpt from Joan Didion’s *The Year of Magical Thinking*

Week 3

- “Repeat After Me” from David Sedaris’ *Dress Your Family in Corduroy and Denim* (pgs 141-156)
- “Motherlove” by Michelle Jessamy, from *Couldn’t Keep It To Myself* with commentary by Wally Lamb (pgs 246-265)

Week 4

- “Faith, Power, and Pants” by Bonnie Foreshaw, from Wally Lamb’s *Couldn’t Keep It To Myself* (pgs 186-209)
- Section on verbs from William Zinsser’s *On Writing Well* (pg 108-109)

Week 5

- Chuck Klosterman’s “Crazy Things Seem Normal, Normal Things Seem Crazy” from *The New Kings of Fiction* edited and introduced by Ira Glass (pgs 198-211)
- Natalia Ginzburg’s “He and I” from *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present*, selected and with an introduction by Phillip Lopate. Translated from the original Italian by Dick Davis.

Week 6

- “Go Carolina” from David Sedaris’ *Me Talk Pretty One Day* (pgs 3-15)

Week 7

- Excerpt from Craig Thompson’s graphic novel *Blankets* (pgs 36-60)
- Chapter 1 (“Origins”) of Barack Obama’s *Dreams From My Father* (pgs 3-27)

Appendix C: Writing Workshop Prompts

First Day of School

For the first take-home assignment of the workshop, I wanted a prompt that would give students the widest possible amount of topic choice. The men had known me for just two hours before they sat down to work on this assignment, and I was frankly not sure what they would be comfortable revealing at that point. Therefore when I distributed the “First Day of School” assignment, I gave the verbal instruction that they could write about any first day they preferred. Some picked the first “first day” that they could remember, others chose the first day of high school, and still others wrote about the first day as Mercy College students. One student described his first day as a study-abroad student in Japan. Another wrote about his first day in juvenile detention. All fifteen students submitted a piece of writing in response to this prompt.

Learning to Read

This prompt was also designed to give the writers a lot of flexibility in their approaches. I gave the verbal instruction that despite the wording, students did not have to write about their memories of learning to decode text on a page. I received eleven pieces of writing in response to this prompt, with great variation in approach. One student wrote about his mother teaching him to spell his name by whipping him with a belt until he could do it correctly. Another wrote about teaching himself to read French from inside his cell. A third wrote about coming home from an earlier prison bid to find that his young daughter had learned to read while he was away. Two students who were not in class the week this prompt was assigned indicated that they could not do the piece because they didn’t remember learning to read. The other two students who I did not receive writing from were not present in the workshop the week this assignment was collected.

Six-word Memoirs

I introduced and distributed examples of the six-word memoir as part of the lesson on self-editing, to introduce the idea that every word must earn its place on the page by doing useful work. The activity supposedly dates back to Ernest Hemingway, who was challenged to write a novel in six words and responded, “For Sale: Baby shoes, never worn” (Fershleiser & Smith, 2008). The prompt to compose their own six-word memoirs was an optional bonus activity assigned along with “Learning to Read”. They seemed to enjoy reading the examples I passed out in class, but the exercise is clearly a difficult one and only six of the students attempted it – although most who did wrote several different versions. (Some of the results appear at the beginning of each chapter in this thesis.)

Why College?

Given my research interest in the students’ engagement with higher education, I included one prompt that explicitly encouraged the writers to reflect on their college experience. The question “Why College?” provided an opportunity for students to discuss their decision to pursue an undergraduate degree, but also to explore what they believed they had gotten out of their participation since joining. The writers reflected on this question from both sides of their decision, recalling their early feelings towards higher education and explaining the programme benefits that they had discovered as members. Not indicating in the prompt whether I was looking for their reasoning before or after joining offered a valuable analytic opportunity to see how students used their current knowledge of the Hudson Link programme in their retrospective recastings of their decision to join. All fifteen students submitted a piece of writing in response to this prompt.

Inspirational Teacher

The wording of this assignment asked students to write about “a teacher who inspired, influenced, engaged, or otherwise reached” them. I also gave the verbal instruction that this portrayal need not be flattering. I received thirteen pieces of writing in response to this prompt. Nine were character sketches of teachers who had been positive forces in the men’s

lives, including one Mercy College professor, a grandmother, a martial arts instructor, a domestic employee, two schoolteachers, a private trumpet instructor, and two non-academic volunteers that the men had met in other prison programmes. All three of the negative portrayals were searing criticisms of primary school teachers who had been ineffective or inappropriate, two of whom were depicted telling the writer he would eventually end up in prison. Finally there was one piece that described not a teacher but an environment where the student felt he had learned the most – “the streets”. Both of the students who did not submit anything were absent from class that week.

Final Memoir: Tell me the story of your education

In the fifth session of the writing workshop, I held an individual conference with each student and asked him, “If I asked you to tell me the story of your education, what would you tell me?” As we discussed the experiences each writer found most important to the story of his education, we co-constructed an individual version of the final prompt. Over the next four to five weeks, these pieces were written, discussed, edited, and revised between two and five times. Many contain segments of earlier pieces that the men expanded. I met with each writer every week and made suggestions based on their progress, but the revision process and the number of drafts they turned in was up to the students themselves. By the end of the second workshop I had thirteen final memoirs. Two of the final pieces I received and analysed were first drafts; in both cases the writers expressed a desire to redraft but never submitted any further versions. Of the two students that did not submit pieces, one had struggled throughout our sessions to overcome his writer’s block and in the end decided not to submit anything; the other said he had too much work for his other classes and was not able to find the time to write a final memoir.

I felt that these prompts were all quite effective at eliciting the data I needed. If I were ever to run another such workshop, my written instructions would be more explicit in anticipation of inevitable student absences. I designed the wording of assignments to be vague and non-directional, but in some cases that wording had the opposite effect when not

accompanied by verbal instructions; for example both of the students who were absent from the session in which “Learning to Read” was assigned thought I wanted a literal recollection of learning to decode text on a page. As the workshop members had no way of contacting me between sessions, they had to rely solely on the take-home assignment sheets I sent them, so these should have been worded more clearly.

Appendix D: Quantitative Data Collection and Analysis

The sample for quantitative data collection and analysis was comprised of anyone who had ever filled out the initial forms to begin the process of enrolling in Hudson Link as of September 2009. This dataset contained 349 individuals who could be broken down into the following four categories:

- Men who began the process of applying to Hudson Link but who never completed their official enrolment
- Men who started²⁶ with Hudson Link but were no longer enrolled
- Men who started with Hudson Link and were currently enrolled
- Men who had graduated from Mercy College and were no longer enrolled

The sample did *not* include men whose names were or had previously been on the Hudson Link waiting list, but whose enrolment had not been initiated.

The data collected from the student files included:

- Student names and Department Identification Numbers (DIN)
- Dates of enrolment
- Previous college credits held at time of application/enrolment
- Degrees awarded and years of degree awards (if applicable)
- Time to completion of Hudson Link degree (if applicable)
- Reason for leaving the programme (in the case of inactive files)²⁷

Once these data were culled by hand and copied into a locked electronic database on my home computer, Department Identification Numbers were used to locate each student through the Inmate Lookup tool on the State of New York Department of Correctional Services website. From these records I extracted and recorded the following information about each student:

- Date of birth
- Date of arrest
- Minimum and maximum sentence length
- Parole eligibility date

²⁶ N.B. “Starting Mercy College” is defined as having taken at least one course.

²⁷ N.B. The reason was recorded only when it was possible to discern it – some files did not indicate the student’s reason for departure.

- Current incarceration status (incarcerated, released, released to parole, or returned to custody)

Using these two sources of raw information, I calculated the following information:

- Average age and age range of Hudson Link students at time of arrest
- Average age and age range of Hudson Link students at time of enrolment
- Average sentence length and sentence length range of Hudson Link students
- Average progress into sentence at time of Hudson Link enrolment
- Average years until first parole hearing at time of Hudson Link enrolment
- Hudson Link graduate recidivism rate
- Number of degrees awarded and years of degree awards

One of my fieldwork challenges was the room for human error within my quantitative data collection strategy, due to several factors. The full dataset was compiled from twelve years' worth of handwritten records, which had been kept by multiple parties, each with his or her own note taking and coding systems, in various levels of legibility and all written in pencil. There was at least one piece of data missing from every file, and many of the records were those of students who spent little time in the programme and thus left faint or no impression on the academic coordinator's memory. Gate keeping was also a pervasive problem with the quantitative records, both because Hudson Link wanted to protect its own students from the Department of Corrections and because they wanted to protect their image and reputation from me. My best chance of minimising possible error, to my calculation, was doing all the quantitative data collection myself, rather than using the student clerks that had initially been offered as my assistants. This meant that if there was human error present in the collection, at least it was standardised. The student clerks were also quite a bit more willing to work with me in other ways when I told them I would not be taking advantage of their free help on this overwhelmingly large yet tedious undertaking.

***Data is current as of October 2009 through June 2010

Appendix E: Quantitative Analysis Results

Hudson Link Basic Demographics

Number of students who have taken at least one class with Hudson Link: 292
Number of students active during 2009-2010 academic year: 89

Average minimum sentence of all HL students (n=292): 18.3 years
Average minimum sentence of active HL students (n=89): 19.2 years

All Hudson Link students with maximum sentence of life: 60.2% (176/292)
Active Hudson Link students with maximum sentence of life: 58.4% (52/89)

Shortest minimum of a Hudson Link student: 2 to 4 years
Longest definite maximum of a Hudson Link student: 25 to 50 years
Longest indefinite minimum of a Hudson Link student: 35.5 years to life

Average time to first parole date among all HL students (n=292): 8.3 years
Average time completed at time of enrollment for all HL students: 9.3 years
Students who had passed at least one parole board review: 7% (23/292)

Average time to first parole date among active HL students (n=89): 9.2 years
Average time completed at time of enrollment for active HL students: 7.9 years
Students who had passed at least one parole board review: 0%

Degrees

As of summer 2010 Mercy College had awarded a total of 200 degrees to 144 men:

114 Bachelor's of Science degrees
86 Associate's Degrees
56 men received both their A.S. and B.S. with Hudson Link

Graduates

38 graduates (A.S., B.S., and both) released
0 returned to prison on new convictions
1 returned to prison on a parole violation (leaving the jurisdiction)
106 graduates (A.S., B.S., and both) still incarcerated

Previous educational attainment of active students

36/89 had previous college credits from an outside school
19/89 completed the prison's Certificate in Ministry Program
34/89 had no credits but had been accepted on the basis of their placement test scores

Appendix F: Sample Analysis Sheet

<u>Writing Workshop</u>	
Participant/Student: [REDACTED]	Date: February 9, 2010
Researcher/Instructor: L. McDowell	
<u>Why College ?</u>	
I had always dreamed of attending college and becoming successful so that I could take care of my mother. Watching her struggle to push her trolley to [REDACTED] High School selling "grato" (a form of bread) and butter, washing our school uniforms and yard clothes with blisters on her fingers, only to make sure we had food—even if it was only sugar an' water an' bread—clean clothes to wear, a roof over our head, and to make sure we attended school. Most importantly, I wanted to make her proud. I remember vividly the joy on her face and how happy she was when my brother had passed his exam to attend [REDACTED] High School. I said to myself, "mi ago mek mama proud an' happy di same way." Between my high school year and migrating to the United States, I was derailed from my vision by becoming involved in the "rude bwoy" and drug dealing lifestyle. It was not until my present incarceration—well, there was one other occasion where I completed the forms to enroll in the College of Aeronautics but never went—that I decided to resuscitate my dream and embark on such an academic journey. It was a gradual process. I was sentenced to a draconian term of 15 years. My sentenced commenced at Clinton Correctional Facility. After eighteen months, I was transferred to Sing Sing. For the first four years of my immurement, I engaged in the dangerous and risk-taking culture of prison: selling weed, carrying weapons, and other negatives of prison you can imagine. I never used any form of drugs, however. Still, I cared nothing about rehabilitation. My only objective was to have my conviction overturned in order to return to the streets. I yearned to continue my reckless standard	
1	

Figure 16: Sample writing workshop essay, Page 1

Jonathan
Why College?

What is the story “about”? 1-2 sentence plot summary.

This is the story of Jonathan deciding to pursue college in prison despite his and his friends’ initial reservations about it.

When in the author’s life does this story take place?

Aside from the first paragraph, which reflects on Jonathan’s feelings about college as a small child in Jamaica, this story takes place after he has begun his term of imprisonment in the United States.

What does the narrator explicitly reveal about himself?

“Dreamed of attending college and becoming successful” so he could take care of his mother, who worked extremely hard for him and his siblings but was still poor; filled out the forms to enroll in the College of Aeronautics but never went; was “derailed from my vision” and became (because he became?) involved with drug dealing and the “rude bwoy” lifestyle; decided in prison to “resuscitate” his dreams of going to college, and it was a gradual process; is serving 15 years and spent the first four continuing to commit crimes while in prison, interested only in getting back to the streets to continue with what he had been doing on the outside; “Was always overly mature and intelligent for my age”; “Officer Clinton then stated, ‘You’re gonna change Jonathan, watch and see.’ He was right!”

What are the themes of this piece?

Personal change; going back to an earlier childhood dream from which he was derailed; learning to think for oneself and not believing everything you are told even if it’s college that tells it to you; education as an opportunity to change oneself and avoid future recidivism

What are the key images?

N/A

What role does education play/how is education represented in this piece?

Jonathan portrays education, specifically college education, as a bridge to becoming successful. Education as a change agent. While all the CAU board members “had an inkling of the importance of higher education” they resisted going to college for three reasons: 1) “those who become bourgeois or quashie and walk around the prison as *the elites*” 2) college wouldn’t do much good once they were deported back to “the violent and poverty-stricken ghetto areas in Jamaica” 3) Marcus Garvey and the reggae artist Capleton said “not to be crammed with the subject matter of the book or the philosophy of the classroom...many a man was educated outside the classroom” (sounds like Francis, who incidentally is the president of CAU!). However Jonathan says this discussion culminated in his decision to begin the journey and enroll in CMP, which he calls the stepping stone to Mercy. He believed that it was possible, as some of the other brethren agreed, that it was possible to “remain grounded” and to “remain conscious of the struggle”, basically not to succumb to any brainwashing attempts on the part of the institution (college). He also states as a personal reason that “education...can be the key if I intend to open any doors to achievable success. It also plays a significant role in terms of closing the door on potential recidivism. It can broaden my options, and gives me an alternative to crime and criminal behavior. Most

importantly, it can transform my life and allows me to view life from a different vantage point and through different lenses.”

What were my main written comments about this piece?

My main comments for Jonathan were that he could slow down a bit in expounding his reasons to join college, because he does rush through them a bit. I also said that the way he ordered the pros and cons list and where in the list he says the conversation “culminated in his decision to go to college” was a bit confusing.

What discussions did I have with the author about this piece?

In what way might these comments have affected second/third drafts and/or later pieces?

Or...

In what way might this piece have been affected by earlier comments?

This piece was submitted the week after Jonathan came to talk to me after class. He had been very quiet so far in the workshop, to the point that I really thought he did not care for me or the workshop activities at all. He hadn’t really been opening up in his writing either – that second assignment was *one paragraph*. And he basically asked me what I was doing at the prison. What I was trying to accomplish with my research. He subtly implied (or at least I believed he was implying) that he didn’t trust me. We talked for about 20 minutes and his attitude towards me seemed to change, and to warm a bit, by the end. In my understanding, it was that conversation that made Jonathan decide I was okay, and that he could actually trust me more than he’d previously thought. It was also in this conversation that he told me he and his friends (I don’t know if he actually used the word “friends”) saw college as a “white man’s brainwash institution”. We talked about this for a bit and in the weeks after his writing got longer... and the following week he rewrote his learning to read piece with much, much more detail.

Other notes

College writing

Figure 17: Sample analysis sheet for essay pictured in Figure 16.

Appendix G: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Autobiographical Writing, Narrative, and the Personal Essay Information for Participants

Invitation

You have been offered a place in a writing workshop run by Lila McDowell, a doctoral student at Oxford University. This writing workshop is being offered to Hudson Link students as part of the research for a doctoral thesis. It is being carried out under the supervision of Professor Viv Ellis of the Oxford University Department of Education and Professor Mary Bosworth at the Oxford University Centre for Criminology. This project has been reviewed and given ethical clearance by the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.

The following information explains a bit about both the workshop and the goals of this research study: how it is being conducted, what your participation would involve should you accept this invitation, and how the resulting data will be used. If you have any questions after reading the information provided, please ask. You have as much time as you need to decide whether or not you would like to participate. There will be no negative repercussions if you choose not to participate or, if after agreeing to be part of the study, you change your mind and withdraw.

Description of the course

The course to which you have been invited is an autobiographical writing workshop. The sessions will run for eight consecutive Tuesdays during the afternoon module. Your participation will be complete by the end of the fall academic semester. The workshop sessions will focus on writing and editing a personal narrative about your experiences with reading, writing, and learning both inside and outside of prison.

Description of the research

The purpose of this research is to learn more about the educational experiences of incarcerated men undertaking higher education while in prison. The goal of the study is to learn more about how and why incarcerated students use education and how their educational experiences may affect their time and their lives inside Sing Sing Correctional Facility. Class discussion, in-class and take-home written assignments, drafts of your final piece, and your finished final piece will all be treated as research data and analyzed.

Voluntary participation

Your participation in the writing workshop is voluntary. You have been offered a place but are under no obligation to accept it. There will not be any adverse consequences should you decide not to participate. You will receive written feedback on your work throughout the course; however, your attendance and performance in the course will in no way affect your standing in Hudson Link or with Mercy College. This writing workshop does not offer academic credit and you will not receive a final grade or examination. You should not accept a place on this course if you anticipate not being able to attend all sessions. However, should you decide to drop out of the course once you have accepted a place, you will not be penalized in any way.

Data Collection

In addition to your drafts and final finished pieces produced for the workshop, the researcher will take notes written during class discussions. If at any time you would like to say something confidential or ask a question about the study you are more than welcome to do so. Anything you say off the record will not be reported at any time (subject to the terms of the confidentiality agreement).

Confidentiality and Handling of Data

After each class session, the researcher will type up notes taken during the workshop. In all notes and transcriptions you will be identified by a given alias, and any identifying information will be destroyed. By making your responses anonymous the researcher will protect you, as best she can, from being identified on the basis of what you have written or said.

What you say in class discussions and what you write in course assignments will not be shared with anyone outside of the workshop until it has been anonymised. The only exception to this rule is the disclosure of planned escape, planned harm to yourself, or planned harm to others. If any such information emerges during your interview, the researcher will be obligated to report it to the relevant authorities.

Other than the above exceptions, nothing you say can or will affect your standing as a Hudson Link or Mercy College student.

Use of Data

The results will be used as part of an Oxford doctoral thesis. If you would like a copy of the published results, please inform the researcher at any time, in person or using the contact details provided below.

Care and Support

Autobiographical writing demands serious reflection and the investigation of memories, attitudes, and life experiences. At times this work may provoke very intense, perhaps even overwhelming, feelings. We would like you to feel free and safe to undertake this activity with the knowledge that you will have access to support, should it become necessary. If at any time during or after the duration of the course you would like to speak with someone about feelings that have come up in the writing process, speak either to the researcher or to Ms. Mohammed. Your request for support will not be shared with other participants.

Contact information

Should you have any further questions about this research, please feel free to contact Lila McDowell or Viv Ellis at the following postal address:

Department of Educational Studies
15 Norham Gardens
Oxford, UK OX2 6PY

Any questions and/or comments are most welcome at any time.

THANK YOU

Autobiographical Writing, Narrative, and the Personal Essay
Consent Form for Participation

This writing workshop is offered as part of a research study that seeks to learn more about the educational experiences of Hudson Link students. This is a study undertaken by Lila McDowell as part of her doctoral research at the University of Oxford, England.

1. I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet about this study and have been given the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequences to myself.
3. I understand that declining to participate in this workshop, or deciding to leave the workshop in the middle, will not affect my academic standing as a Hudson Link or Mercy College student.
4. I understand who will have access to identifying information provided and what will happen to that information at the completion of the study.
5. I hereby give permission for parts of drafts and/or final versions of my written work, as well as notes from class discussions, to be published as part of the researcher's Oxford University doctoral thesis.
6. I know whom to contact with further questions or comments regarding my participation.
7. I know whom to contact for care, support, and help with any feelings that may come up during or after the writing process.
8. I understand that this project has been reviewed and received ethical clearance from the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.
9. I understand that any information I reveal about planned escape, planned harm to myself, and planned harm to others will be reported to prison staff.

I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's name: _____

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's name: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____