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JSTOR Access in Prison Second Chance Month Submission:
Juan Portieles

There's an old adage that says *knowledge is power*. But where does knowledge come from? Does it come from personal experimentation or the experiences imparted by others?

When I was invited to write about education in prison, there were a lot of thoughts that came to my mind. For the past 15 years of my incarceration, I have sought various formal and informal academic endeavors – both faith-based and character-oriented. Through it all, I have acquired useful information that has shaped who I am today.

Education in prison has taught me how to manage my life responsibly, conduct myself accordingly, hold myself accountable for my actions, and not be so judgmental. I have learned how to channel my emotions in a healthy, positive, and productive manner, conquer addiction, and overcome depression. Moreover, I have learned to appreciate all the wonderful blessings that are available on this planet. In addition to intellectual acumen, attending classes has enhanced my sense of worth and has increased my self-esteem and confidence level. Overall, learning has made me more conscious, and a better, well-rounded individual – one that my community can be proud of.

No longer do I place myself before others or engage in fruitless activities. Fortunately, I've been able to share some of that knowledge with my peers, for when knowledge is passed along it becomes *wisdom*. Moving forward, education has inculcated that I can still make a difference in the lives of others, even though I can't change the past. I don't receive any money for my efforts, but the sense of helping others is rewarding enough. This form of restorative justice has been my greatest contribution to society.

Education has also changed my world view and perception in several constructive ways. Not only has it cultivated my social, communication, and leadership skills, it has enriched me culturally. Furthermore, it has made me more optimistic. Now, I am 100 percent confident that kindness, the flame of the human spirit, will never be quenched. It's one thing to think that people can be generous; it's totally different when you know that they are.

And how can I be so sure that people care? Because I know how much difficulty educators go through just to make this dream a reality. I know the pain and frustration they endure for doing what they do, because their mission is not popular or is it rarely received with open arms by everyone. But, don't take my word for it. If you've never considered being a part of this amazing journey, I welcome you to visit us some day. I promise you that you won't be disappointed, but you will at least have a better *understanding* of how much time, energy, commitment, dedication, and resources it takes just to get through these gates. And like me, you will also be convinced that this demonstration of love proves that people still operate with a morally good conscience by being merciful, compassionate, and sympathetic.

I believe I can speak on behalf of all of my peers when I say: please forgive us, and accept our apology for the pain we have caused you. And, to all the countless teachers and donors who support this cause and the innumerable volunteers who work tirelessly behind the scenes to create a space where we can progress in our rehabilitation and realize redemption – thank you very much for all that you do. You truly are heroes.

To answer the original question posed in the introduction: knowledge comes from above and is manifested through love. That is why knowledge is *power*. But, without the support of caring individuals working together to make this world a better place, reconciliation would not be possible and hope would be nowhere to be found.

Juan Carlos Portieles is a peer facilitator at Horizon (a residential program teaching inside residents re-entry skills), and is currently in the process of earning a bachelor's degree from Miami Dade College. He wholeheartedly believes that reformation is attainable through education and other learning initiatives.

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Reclaiming Identity Through Learning: Defining Self through Prison-Based Education

Education has always been presented to me as a means of elevation. My father made that clear when he drove my brother and me around Detroit, pointing out mansions and homeless encampments, explaining that “A’s and B’s will get you what you want, C’s will get you in the welfare line, and D’s and F’s will have you homeless.” He exposed us to business and success, but the roadmap to achieving it remained unclear.

Despite excelling academically at Cass Tech and later attending Ferris State University in 2003, I lacked a clear sense of direction. My passions basketball, dancing, traveling, and helping people pulled me in multiple directions. Life happened fast. I left Ferris, returned home to help my mother, took classes at Wayne County Community College, mentored kids through Big Brothers & Sisters of America, and started a nightclub promotion business. It was successful until the 2008 recession forced me to pivot. I moved to Florida, worked my way up to a head operations manager role at UFHealth in Gainesville, and pursued a Business Administration degree. But just when it seemed like I had finally found my path, my life took an unexpected detour.

A Detour That Led to Purpose

Incarceration was never part of the plan, yet it became the defining chapter in my life. Facing a 15-year sentence, I had every reason to succumb to bitterness. But instead, I found a new purpose for education. I learned not just for myself, but for those around me. I became a certified law clerk, helping inmates successfully appeal their cases and reduce their sentences. I also taught credit-building and investing workshops, equipping men with tools for life beyond prison. And when I was selected for a pilot college program for Environmental Science at Columbia Annex, I felt like I was finally back on track.

That hope was tested when an officer, resentful of inmates receiving education, falsely accused me of breaking a rule. He stated, “I’m the one who’s going to [mess] up your life.” In the moment, this seemed to be true. I was thrown into confinement, kicked out of the program, and transferred back to my previous camp, Florida State Prison. If that wasn’t enough, my law clerk certification was revoked due to interference from a former officer turned librarian. Every door I tried to open seemed to be slammed shut.

But faith wouldn't allow me to stop. I prayed and took a leap, writing directly to the head of the Department of Education. Mrs. Newberry responded with an opportunity that no one had ever been granted in the Department of Corrections, a second chance at college. She arranged for my transfer to Everglades CI to enroll in Miami Dade College's program. When I arrived, Mrs. Carlo and Dr. Brantley welcomed me and got me enrolled. The warden told me, "I personally signed off for you to come to this incentivized camp. Don't make me regret it." I had no intentions of doing so. By July 2023, I earned my Associate's Degree. Now, in my final semester of my Bachelor's in Leadership and Management Innovation, I stand as living proof of what God can do, no matter what man tries to prevent.

Changing Perspectives: The Ripple Effect of Education

My journey has not been mine alone. Every step I've taken in my educational path has changed how my family, friends, and fellow inmates view education.

- **Family:** My parents always valued education, but witnessing my resilience despite the odds deepened their belief in its power. My mother, who raised me in faith, saw firsthand how God used learning to restore my identity and purpose. My father, who always emphasized hard work, now sees education as more than just a pathway to money. It's also a tool for reinvention.
- **Peers in Prison:** When I first started helping men earn their GEDs, many doubted whether education could truly change their futures. But seeing me go from an inmate law clerk, to an education aid, and to a college graduate shifted their mindsets. More men started enrolling in classes, believing that if I could overcome roadblocks, they could too.
- **Friends and Community:** Many of my old friends and associates never pursued higher education. But after seeing me not only complete my degree but also become a dually certified Water Treatment Operator despite being locked away, they started reconsidering their own limitations. If education could open doors for me in prison, what was stopping them from unlocking opportunities in their own lives?

A Testament to Faith and Education

Against all odds, I paid for my wastewater and water treatment textbooks, studied relentlessly, took Florida's state exam, and passed with flying colors. Now, I am a certified Water Treatment Operator with a Bachelor's degree on the way. This is more than an accomplishment; it is a testimony of faith, perseverance, and the transformative power of education.

There is a quote by David Brinkley that resonates deeply with my journey: “A successful man is one who can lay a firm foundation with the bricks others have thrown at him.” Every brick of adversity thrown at me—false accusations, lost opportunities, confinement, and institutional roadblocks—became the foundation for my future. Instead of allowing those challenges to break me, I used them to build something greater. My journey has taught me one undeniable truth, that education is freedom. It is the key that opens doors, even in the most confined places. And it is my mission to continue using my story to inspire others to unlock their own potential, no matter where they start. I challenge you to live every second of your life with a great purpose.