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Authors

Cohen, David R
Panich, Lee

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The Prison Notebook: Lessons Learned Teaching Anthropology at San Quentin State Prison

David Reed Cohen

Department of Anthropology
University of California, Berkeley

Lee Panich

Department of Anthropology
University of California, Berkeley

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This article addresses our strategies for teaching anthropological archaeology at San Quentin State Prison in California. For over 150 years, San Quentin State Prison has stood along the San Francisco Bay. Designed to hold 3,317 inmates, today 5,222 men are incarcerated at San Quentin some of whom may have been great anthropologists had their lives turned out differently.

Incarceration, Legislation, Education

In the early 1970s, governments shifted their priorities from inmate rehabilitation to incarceration spurred by President Nixon's anti-crime campaign and increasing public fears of violent crime. Since then, tougher laws have increased prison populations due to stricter sentencing guidelines and the creation of new criminal offenses such as with those spawned from President Reagan's "War on Drugs" campaign (1986) and California's "Three Strikes" law (1994), putting a strain on rehabilitation resources for inmates.

In 1994, Congress passed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (H.R.3355), effectively ending most higher education programs in US prisons. This overturned a section of the Higher Education Act of 1965 (Pub. L. no. 89-329) that allowed incarcerated individuals to receive financial assistance via Pell Grants for post-secondary education, which had been funding many of the higher education programs running in prisons since the 1970s. Today, California's prisons have the lowest availability of education/job training programs in the US.

The College Program at San Quentin

In response to the end of Pell Grants for prisoners, the College Program at San Quentin (CPSQ) began in 1996. It is sponsored by Patten University, managed under the Prison University Project, and funded by grants and donations.

CPSQ is the only on-site college degree program at a California prison. About 70 volunteers serve as instructors (MA required) and teaching assistants for about 250 students a semester. Students in the program have a GED/high school diploma, and earn an Associate of Arts Degree from Patten University in about three and a half years taking two courses per semester. Students range in age from 20 to 72; the average age is 36. As of 2004-2005, 32% were white, 37% were black, 18% were Hispanic, 7% were Asian, and 6% identified themselves as “other” (see www.prisonuniversityproject.org for more information).

Participating in the CPSQ is a major commitment of time, effort and emotions for the students, and most set high personal standards for their work. The students understand what a privilege CPSQ is for them personally as well as within the state prison system as a whole, and they excel despite significant obstacles such as the lack of unstructured time to do coursework (most students have day jobs) or the daily emotional realities of living in a prison.

California racially segregates inmates, and the classroom setting of CPSQ is one of the few integrated places at San Quentin. The program also includes students from different classes, ages, and educational backgrounds (GED through Ph.D.). Our courses were designed, in part, to take advantage of this diversity in presenting the approaches of anthropology and promoting the cultural understandings that studying anthropology lends itself to.

Student in class at San Quentin (2007). Photo courtesy Heather Rowley

Strategies for Teaching Anthropology in Prison

We taught two semester-long courses at San Quentin—Ancient African History and Ancient North American History—both of which were co-taught with other graduate students from UC Berkeley. Teaching ancient history from an anthropological perspective enabled us to use data from all four fields of anthropology to teach critical thinking skills and offer key insights into human history in different parts of the world. For the Africa course, we covered a wide range of topics ranging from human origins to the slave trade of the early modern era. The North America course similarly focused on case studies involving important issues or societies in pre-contact North America. This approach was somewhat constricting as some students would have preferred more in-depth material about particular societies or time periods, but on the whole a broad survey ensured that the course covered material of interest to nearly all of the students.

Due to the housing situations of some students effective teaching time was limited to one and a half hours per class period. Lectures comprised the bulk of the course, and we also made time for general discussion. Grading was based on a combination of class participation, four quizzes, and a research paper and in-class presentation on a topic of the student's choice. We found that this format worked well in that the quizzes encouraged students to do the readings and to take notes in lectures. The research paper and presentation allowed students to integrate the knowledge and skills gained over the semester into a project of their own design.

Physical constraints also shaped the courses we taught. San Quentin has strict rules about what types of materials can be used in the classroom. Required readings and films had to be approved by the prison administration before the beginning of the semester, which somewhat limited the material that the students could use in their research papers. Our students' cell space was another key consideration in this period of prison overcrowding, and we consequently limited our weekly reading assignments to one or two required articles or chapters.

Two main points can be made from course evaluations written by our students. First, it is important in a prison setting to establish clear guidelines and expectations at the beginning of the semester about course assignments and other issues. Second, with a student body with such disparate educational backgrounds, it is difficult to find an appropriate level of course material. In both classes we used popular college-level introductory textbooks combined with selected articles and chapters from the anthropological and archaeological literature. We recommend using concise, well written pieces. While the students welcome a challenge, they do not have time to digest lengthy or overly theoretical readings.

Overall, we feel that our courses were successful in terms of our own expectations and based on our students' evaluations. Given the diversity of the students in our courses, we hoped to provide students with the information and skills they need to counter pervasive stereotypes and misconceptions about other societies, past and present. We also wanted to challenge the students to engage with the material; we found that the research paper was a

successful way for the students to focus on a topic of interest to them and to synthesize material from a variety of sources. These two interrelated goals—to highlight human diversity and to encourage critical thinking—are a cornerstone of teaching anthropology in any setting and they are particularly well suited to constructing empowering courses on anthropology to be taught in prison.

David Reed Cohen is a PhD candidate in anthropological archaeology at the University of California, Berkeley. His current research in Botswana examines sociopolitical injustices resulting from contact between the indigenous hunter-gatherers, migrant Bantu-speaking farmers and colonial administrations. He also is developing an anthropological non-profit, AltaPunta, and currently coordinates an archaeological public outreach program at the Archaeological Research Facility that serves the San Francisco Bay Area.

Lee Panich is a PhD candidate in anthropological archaeology at the University of California, Berkeley. His primary research interest is the persistence of indigenous identities in colonial contexts. His PhD dissertation focuses on the native inhabitants of Mission Santa Catalina in Baja California, Mexico. He is also interested in community involvement in archaeological research and the public presentation of archaeological sites.