

**Inmates and Alternatives: A Unique
Junior High School E-mail Project**

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ABSTRACT



The phrase ‘pen pals’ acquires a whole new meaning when it describes this West Virginia teacher’s award-winning project — linking students electronically with inmates at a nearby state prison. Who learned more? The benefits flowed in both directions” (Coburn, 1993).

Telecommunications can offer students a means of discussing society’s problems while developing an understanding of the complex social forces at work that result in immoral and criminal behavior.

Prisons are populated with individuals who are so called social misfits who have violated our laws. But many prisoners become so as a direct result of society’s problems themselves. Many prisoners share a common background of child abuse and neglect, poverty, family problems and violence which are just a few of the causes leading to their separation from society. Sometimes, this isolation from society serves only to isolate thoughts and does little to prevent the same mistakes from being repeated by others.

**PROJECT
DESCRIPTION**

The project my students did for three semesters gained national and international recognition by linking several classrooms from around the world to a maximum security prison in West Virginia. The project titled “Inmates and Alternatives” allowed students to interact anonymously with inmates for three semesters. Inmates in WV and students from around the globe explored forces at work in society that lead to incarceration. The dialogue was dramatic to say the least!

The students at Moundsville Jr. School in West Virginia, served as the link between eleven inmates from the state’s maximum security prison, and classrooms from Alaska, Belgium, Hawaii, California, Louisiana, Missouri, England, Canada, Ohio, and Bermuda. Students involved were able to, via e-mail, establish a dialogue with the inmates and discuss causes and effects of society’s problems. Communications took place through AT&T’s Learning Network and the state prison’s electronic bulletin board. Each participating school was assigned an inmate with whom to communicate over a twelve week period. Students developed questions to send via e-mail to the West Virginia school who in turn

relayed them to the prison inmates via local BBS. Inmate responses were then relayed back to the distant learners via the global network.

“The project began with each inmate sending a biographic character sketch to one of the participating schools. Inmates’ messages were sent to students at Moundsville and were then forwarded to the Learning Circle so that schools throughout the world could read them” (Burrall, 1994).

“All messaging between inmates and students was anonymous with the inmates using fictitious names taken from Tolkiens’s Middle Earth characters. Schools were identified by geographic location only. This protection of identities resulted in messages being candid and personal” (Burrall, 1994).

A group publication was compiled at the end of the project and shared by all participants, including the inmates.

This is a quote from one of the inmates letters: “I was more or less guilty before I was tried in the eyes of the jury. I had the reputation of a trouble maker and it all spoke for itself in my trial. So if you think being ‘bad’ is cool, you should think about how a jury of your peers would judge you, based on a reputation of being ‘bad’” (Coburn, 1993).

Following is the autobiographical sketch from the prisoner called Sting:

To GEORGIA from Sting Autobiography

To the students with whom I have chosen to converse, my name is Sting. I am a 23 year old guy standing at 5’ 9” weighing in at or around 170 lbs. I’m serving a life without parole sentence and I’ve been in this place since I was 19. Since I arrived here I’ve received my GED with Honors and have become proficient in the use of various computing skills and software. I take pride in being able to talk directly with anyone about anything. I accept the fact (even when writing pen-pals) that the cards of public opinion are constantly stacked against the incarcerated, and that as unbiased and nonjudgemental as you or I might try to be, our opinions are a form of judgment.

I was born in Singing River Hospital, August 21, 1970. I’ve been raised between Moss Point, Escatawpa, and Pascagoula. My parents were divorced when I was very young. Fairmont, West Virginia is the place where my 1st and 2nd grade, part of 5th and 6th grade and the start of my senior year at school was done. 3rd and 4th grades were in

SAMPLE DIALOGUE

Irving, Texas. The 7th grade, the second semester (plus summer school) my 9th 10th and 11th (plus summer school) were all done in Denton, Texas. Obviously I was moved around alot.

Since I was 14 I always had a weekend (during the school year)and a fulltime job (summer) at Dallas Ft. Worth Airport and that sometimes led to other errand running jobs at Love Field. The guy I worked for ran the parking plaza. The place where all the cars were parked for very long times or were just never claimed. You'd be amazed at the amount of vehicles just collecting dust at the impoundment yard. Well one day i was feeding the dog (85 lbs. Pit Bull) the guy was shocked at how well I got along with the dog and introduced me to some others into fighting Pit Bulls. This area of work (at a time when we had been living in the Projects and had to depend on monthly allotments of food stamps) is what led me into the only full-time crime that I've ever been into. I made a great living out of stealing Pit Bull pups, raising, training and fighting the dogs enabled us (my family) to leave the projects and public assistance. This also for three years of my sisters college, a small business degree for my mother, 14 acres and a Spanish Colonial house, and the many other trappings of a better (money-wise) life.

While almost every one of my peers was selling dope, robbing stores, or worked some car radio racket, I, at the time, could only be fined for transporting livestock without the proper permits would at the most be guilty of a minor (if at all existent) misdemeanor. This ended in late 1988 with a black robe figure explaining to me that how there were 49 states OTHER than Texas and that I should find my self one for 365 days or until a year passed ... whichever came first. I didn't make it to summer school, but I did have an incredible summer that ended with my full enlistment in the MARINES.

In September 1989 I was arrested at another persons home, charged with committing murder, robbery, kidnapping, breaking and entering, grand theft, and grand larceny. Denied bond, I waited for a week in court that didn't end like I thought it would. After the several eyewitnesses, the expert testimony of non-experts I received three like without chance of parole, two ninety-nine year sentences well needless to say (but I will) I didn't exactly lose my mind, it just refused to listen to the part that's called common sense.

I've been incarerated here at Moundsville since August 9, 1990 I turned 2 on the receiving unit. I lasted about 14 days then was given the extended tour of lock-up. Upon my release from there I skillfully kicked the GED course in the rear (graduated with honors) and instead of signing up for classes began to jump into the hustle game. I worked and eventually got a TV. and just last year I bought a nice dual cassette

CD player. Soon I'll have a computer. I have become a somewhat intelligent computer compatible type. Likes include anything that may turn into a profitable career and is legal.

As I've stated this is the real me no additives, preservatives or liquid straight-jacket, being the grandchild of African descended, Ireland born, American raised grandparents. My moods tend to swing. However no one ever said that being Black-Irish was easily. I guess that means that I'll always feel oppressed but will still party at the drop of a dime. So as long as you are as truthful and straight to the point with your questions I'll answer them.

....Sting (Spring '94)

Following are questions to inmate Thingol from Indiana - Spring '94

Dear Thingol,

Upon receipt of your letter we found it expedient to write. We hope these few lines will find you in high spirits. Things in the city of Gary are about as well as can be expected. For there's not need of complaining cause complaining only adds to the pain.

In our strive towards excellence we have found that we must overcome many obstacles. Gary is a city plagued by drugs. Last year alone we lost eight fellow students due to drug related crimes.

In our desire to become productive citizens, we know that what we become is left up to us. Our teacher thought for the year is... "Life is to be lived not a mystery to be solved.

After reading your letter we were somewhat perplexed as to how a young man with so much on the ball could fall short when you were well on your way.

Our class selected these questions for we know we have many obstacles before us.

1. What, if anything is the prison system doing to prepare you to re-enter society?
2. What are your plans upon being released from prison.?

- 3. In living the life of Dr. Jeckle and Mr. Hyde what was so unique about conforming to want other wanted you to be that you would sell out on what you were working so hard for?
- 4. What programs are available in prison that will help you grow spiritually?
- 5. As a child was it instilled in you the importance of being ones self? Could this be part of your reoccurring problem?
- 6. As a child what was your home life like? Was both parents in the home taking an active role in childrearing?
- 7. Do you really want to be delivered from drugs? (Why haven't you tried the great deliverer)?
- 8. What advise would you give to today's youth in regard to drugs and life in general?
- 9. How is it that one can detect and then get started back of drugs? Is the "white lady" really that powerful?
- 10. If you could change one thing about your life, what would it be and Why?
- 11. Have you ever thought about turning your live over to Jesus Christ and allowing him to clean you up? (or a god that you can have a personal relationship).

In closing Thingol our prayers are with you, that upon your release from prison (whether it be physical or mental), that you will be delivered from your problems with drugs and that you will find peace within yourself.

Network to Network, Students from Indiana

Here are Thingol's Responses to Indiana — Spring '94

March 10, 1994

BLESSED BE

I received your letter with your questions upon arrival in class this morning. It is good to know such searching questions are part of your

mental and spiritual development. The need to look ahead, to search one's probable futures is an invaluable tool.

First, to address your three related questions on my perceptions and feelings on prison. I can only speak for the prison system in West Virginia, as this is my only experience with the legal system. Here at the state penitentiary we have opportunities not rehabilitation. A man who desires to help himself may participate in a number of programs ranging from college level courses to Rational Behavior Therapy. These programs are not mandatory, if you want to lay in your cell and vegetate you are more than welcome. The administration is willing to help, but the less you wish to accomplish, the easier and cheaper they can do their jobs. I say this from an objective view and not out of derision or anger, it is the truth.

This facility was built in 1865, it is a castle of huge cut stone and all else aside a very beautiful piece of architecture. We are to move to a new prison by October as this facility has been condemned by the federal authorities. I have been informed through the education department that there will be an enormous increase in college opportunities there. I plan to be very aggressive in this area. I have 8 years until eligible for parole and 10 to an automatic discharge and will have my Masters and hope for a Doctorates by the time I leave. Since the day of my physical release is so distant, my plans for such are rather vague. With a high level college degree, the options are virtually limitless.

My early childhood was not disturbed at all. Growing up was really a lot of fun. Our family had a strong Christian base, we attended church regularly and even our TV time was monitored to insure we viewed only what was "wholesome." While both parents shared the job of raising us, my father was more the one to discipline and my mother the care-taker. Being "one's self" was a term at the time that had "hippie" overtones and that was definite taboo. We were to follow the example of others more than cultivate a separate person. It may well be that I never "found myself", that this caused me to experiment with so many alternatives. As I grew older we began to move with increasing frequency. This made friendships difficult and introduced me to some very strange behavior. While we were not expected to be puppets, we were indoctrinated into a "correct" mode of behavior that restricted a lot of free thinking and sheltered us from the real world's pitfalls. During these moves across the eastern U.S., my father always went first and the rest of the family followed. My two younger brothers and I had some problems, the youngest and I did not get along at all and the middle brother was always stuck in the middle. From the eighth grade on both parents worked, this left plenty of time to get into trouble. As we moved, the trouble went from mischief to felony rather

quickly. I committed an arson, (burnt a house that was under construction) and by the tenth grade was firmly into the drug culture.

The Jeckle and Hyde syndrome is not unique, now, in the mid-seventies in rural West Virginia the ability to “use” and still perform and excel was not the norm. Yes, it was a cop-out, and I curse the day i gave in and used drugs to conform to the will of others. It was a sell out, a trade off of a lot of hard work for a life of mental derangement. I was never into the snow, my drug of choice was always LSD. This was back in the days when it was the real stuff too, not a concoction of amphetamines and strychnine. Peyote and mushrooms were a great trip, totally natural and longer lasting. Even during school, much of my time was in a very separate reality. After nine years of heavy LSD and Marijuana use I did finally realize I was killing myself and family. The Detox was a struggle and a great source of pride once I was, and stayed clean. How did I fall? Lust. There was a woman where I worked who more than enchanted me. I found that my wife of six years losing ground, my family once again losing out to my SELFISHNESS. This lady and I enjoyed many hours together, and since I was already putting my family on the line with my behavior, why not smoke a little and trip a lot. My old-new life did not stop this time with drug use.

You gave me a name of the great deliverer. You called him Jesus Christ. Please allow me to give you the Hebrew name he was called during his life on this earth, Yeshua, it means “our salvation”. He has been, for certain my salvation. Even after my conviction I refused to admit to the real reason for my life’s problems. It took an old family minister who continuously came to visit and counsel me to turn my face back to the light. I had many associates (friends?) on the street, to this day none of them has tried to contact me. This minister and several others gave their support when no one but my family would. It gave me cuase to think back on the early teachings and analyze when and where I began to turn away. I can assure you there is a difference between jail house religion and true Christian belief. My belief has made me a new person in many ways. There is now a desire to make an attempt to gie my 15 year old son a father, no I can’t be with him physically, but now I am willing to accept the responsibility to give him proper advice and love. WE have a good relationship now. Not great but good. A great amount of damage was done by my behavior and it will take a lot of work to chang that. I no longer have a desire to use drugs in any form, even when prescribed medicines I ask about possible inebriating effects. That is the danger, I think that even alcohol would put me back on that slide again. God has given me a great will to do exactly what I should have ben doing all along, live! Your teacher’s thought is a good one, in living one’s life you experi-

ence. In searching for the answer to why or what life is you will find yourself beginning to despair of your very existence. Looking for meaning is a two edged sword, if you find the answer and can accept it, great; however, you may refuse to believe what is revealed to you and turn from the truth to a path that will lead to darkness and lies.

My advise to you students about drugs is to stay the hell away, or go through hell, it is a choice each of you will have to make sooner or later. You might fool others as I did, but in the end you will pay as I am. One of the phrases in the Narcotics Anonymous programs is “DRUGS ALWAYS LEAD TO PRISONS, INSTITUTIONS, AND DEATH.” Believe it. As for life in general, go ahead and enjoy it. Really! I doesn’t last as long as you think and each second is a literal creation of God, use it with the zeal of the great gift it is. When you end your day, sit back and reflect on what and if you accomplished what you set out to do. If you didn’t try again in the morning.

THINGOL — Spring ’94

RESULTS

“Communication with inmates allowed students to see how wrong choices can lead to disastrous consequences. The inmates involved in the project gave students an honest look into their personal lives, and I am sincerely grateful for their efforts. These men, who lost families and freedom, gained higher self- esteem and a sense of worth through the project. Telecommunications technology brought two very different segments of society together and brought hope to both” (Burrall, 1994).

REFERENCES

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- Coburn, J. (1993, September). Bill Burrall, 1993 National Teacher of the Year, Uses E-mail to Help Students Explore Society’s Most Difficult Problems. *Technology & Learning*, 14(1), p. 49-50.

EDITORS’ COMMENT

In 1993 the author was named the National Technology Teacher of the Year by IBM and Technology and Learning Magazine. This project was nominated for the prestigious Computer World Smithsonian Award, and has been documented in the archives of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.