

Literate Practices in a Juvenile Detention Home

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and Maddi Kartcheske

This article is a two-part series. In part one, Writing Program Intern Maddi Kartcheske interviewed Patrick Sweeney, Director of the La Salle County Detention Home, via email correspondence. Here, Maddi gets an overview of Patrick's writing in the workplace, as well as some of his writing history. In part two, Writing Program Intern Mackenzie Flowers transcribed Patrick Sweeney's Q & A session during a classroom visit to Delores Robinson's English 101 class at Illinois Valley Community College (IVCC). Delores, a PhD student at Illinois State University (ISU), incorporates the ISU Writing Program writing research practices in her classroom. She invited Patrick to be a guest speaker in her classroom to discuss his literate practices at the La Salle County Detention Home and then graciously shared the video with the *GWRJ*.

Part One: Maddi and Patrick Correspond About Literate Activities

MADDI: Could you please introduce yourself and explain what your job is?

PATRICK: My name is Patrick Sweeney and I am the Director of the La Salle County Detention Home. My job consists of the overall administration of the Detention Home, its budget, staff, policies, physical plant, and resident care.

MADDI: We'd like to start by asking you about any and all kinds of writing that you might do as part of your work. This doesn't have to just be writing with words or in long chunks, but any of the written or visual ways you communicate.

PATRICK: My job requires writing on a daily basis, and this comes in all forms. Reports which are to be presented to the County Board or other community groups. Email is used to communicate with co-workers, outside vendors/contractors, court personnel, etc. Written documentation is a large part of working in a detention facility. Any and all interactions or occurrences must be documented whether in a resident's file, behavior point sheet, or with a special incident report.

MADDI: Could you tell us how you learned these ways of communicating?

PATRICK: I would like to say I learned this all in my years of school, but I would have to say that the majority of my learning was on-the-job training. Don't get me wrong, I attribute my foundations to my formal education, but I have definitely learned that every job has a specific procedure for how we are to use written communication.

MADDI: Were there any moments where you really had an epiphany about why you were writing in a certain way or where it really clicked for you?

PATRICK: Early on in my career I learned that the rules of writing within my field were much different than the rules of writing that I had learned from school. Some people might look at an incident report from a facility and think it to be very repetitive and drawn out, but that is necessary because we cannot leave room for facts to be inferred within our reports. They must be factual and contain every piece of detail from the event, no matter how small.

MADDI: What kind of tools do you use to communicate?

PATRICK: As my career moves on, there is more and more digital communication used, but here at the La Salle County Detention Home, our main tool for written communication is still pen to paper. We have hand-written logbooks, admission paperwork, documentations, and staff notes. Overall, I would say that I use almost every tool to communicate except social media. Cannot say that I will ever get on that train, but you never know.

MADDI: What sort of outside bodies (bosses, organizations, laws, etc.) control the way you write?

PATRICK: As I stated in my answer to an earlier question, the foundation of my writing was learned on the job. Therefore, I would say that the way in which I write is largely controlled by the system within which I work.

MADDI: Could you explain where you fit into the hierarchy of your job? Like, who do you report to and who reports to you? And, discuss what people are affected by your writing? And, whose writing you encounter at work?

PATRICK: I am the Director of Detention Services for the Thirteenth Judicial Circuit (La Salle, Bureau, and Grundy Counties). My direct supervisor is William Pfalzgraf, Director of Court Services, and the Honorable Christopher Ryan, Chief Judge, is in charge of the entire Thirteenth Judicial Circuit. I have an Assistant Director, Shift Supervisors (5), Juvenile Detention Officers (15), Teacher, Teacher's Aide, and part-time Secretary who all report to me. I would have to say that I encounter written communication from everyone I have listed above and many more people involved within our juvenile justice system.

MADDI: How do mechanics, style, grammar, spelling, and that sort of thing factor into your writing? Do you think about them much?

PATRICK: I try my best, personally, to keep my written communications as clean as possible. That being said, I do not feel that it is the most important factor in the written communications within my field. I am not perfect by any means, but I definitely see some poor examples on a daily basis. Sometimes it makes it very difficult to receive the proper information.

MADDI: Could you talk at all about your experience in college (where did you go?), and the sorts of writing you did, and then compare that to the sorts of writing you do now in your career?

PATRICK: I am a graduate of Illinois State University ('98). Obviously, I was required to complete your basic English composition class, and I cannot say that I was very successful, but I passed. I would say that I did much better written work within my Criminal Justice major courses. Though I am not a perfect writer by any means, I would go so far as to say that I am a much better writer now than during my time in formal education.

Part Two: Q&A with Delores Robinson's ENG 101 Class

The following section was transcribed from a video of Patrick Sweeney's visit to Delores Robinson's classroom at IVCC. The video can be found at www.isuwriting.com. Delores and her students asked Patrick questions about the types of writing he does for work, the types of writing that the residents of the detention center do, and other questions about writing at the facility.

QUESTION: What is your main form of communication while working?

PATRICK: My main form of communication is face-to-face talking. Communication is huge but in my line of work with being the administrator, since we are a small facility, I want to go out and talk to the staff, talk to the residents, talk to county board members and all of that. But I also have to put it in writing. Because in my field, in criminal justice, if it is not written then it didn't happen. That is the number one key thing that we tell all employees when they come in: if it is not in writing, if it is not documented, then it didn't happen. I can go and talk to someone but if I don't follow that up with something like a memo saying, "do this," then it is not going to get done. So, writing always goes along with the face-to-face talking and communication.

QUESTION: How formal is your writing?

PATRICK: In my work, I go through all levels of writing. I write notes on a piece of scratch paper and put them in people's mail boxes, all the way up to

formal letters. I have some examples I can pass around. This one is a formal letter that I send out to the health department every year requesting an extra inspection because we are a part of the national school lunch and breakfast program and there are requirements. My writing goes anywhere from very informal to very formal.

QUESTION: What kind of writing do your residents get involved in?

PATRICK: We have a full school program, so the residents around the detention facility have Monday through Friday school year-round, minus some holidays. Our teacher and teacher's aide do all sorts of writing. They write throughout the school day. We also provide journals for the residents because we feel that writing is important, especially for the kids that are coming into the detention home to have that avenue and be able to write down their thoughts. We do monitor what they write because we want to keep it positive, as much as possible, even though they are not in a positive situation. So, writing is all throughout for them.

QUESTION: So, with the prisoner journals, is that something that is kept when they leave as an official document?

PATRICK: That is theirs and they can take it with them. It is more of a therapeutic journal. So, we want them to write about goals that they might have and things that they might do differently when they leave the detention facility. We want them to take that with them when they leave.

QUESTION: How is the communication for the detained youth different from that of an adult prisoner?

PATRICK: It is strict and they are limited. They can communicate with their families via phone but that is just parents and legal guardians. They do write letters. And some kids come in and writing letters is new to them so they learn it in the school program. They show them how you should write a letter and how to address an envelope. Their main form of written communication out is letters. They can send letters to anyone though as long as it is not in violation of their probation.

QUESTION: So, without electronic communication and no access to the internet, can you describe some of the schooling that they get?

PATRICK: The school is basically a one-room schoolhouse because we have kids that come in from all different ages. We have kids from ages 13 to 18. They are all at different levels of schooling. Our teacher will communicate with their home schools to find out what they are working on and what their assignments are. Sometimes we just get a class schedule and then our teacher will try to match it up with our materials. We do have internet access in the

classroom where they can get online to testing sites and whatnot. So, if they are at a safe school and they work on such-and-such on an online schooling site, they can still access that while they are with us.

QUESTION: You mentioned standards for everything and that those are written in manuals. So, is there any kind of policy on how the manuals are handled? Like they must be updated every blank number of years?

PATRICK: I try to update our policy manual on an on-going basis. Every year we are looking at changing things and different policies. Right now, in criminal justice and juvenile criminal justice there is a huge topic of shackling juveniles in court, which in LaSalle county, we have never done that. The kids come into court without any cuffs at all. But there has been research done and people are leaning toward starting to have juveniles shackled in court. But that is something that is changing. Getting policy changes from the state is a little bit different. Most things are still sitting on the desks of people in the Department of Juvenile Justice standards and they have been for fifteen years, so we are mostly still using the older stuff.

QUESTION: I know you said that you have to write down every encounter. Does that also apply to the kids there? If you have a conversation with them would you have to go back and write about that conversation as well?

PATRICK: It depends on the conversation. If it is just a “how are you doing” conversation, then no. Every resident has a file at the detention facility and the staff are required to handwrite log sheets for every kid. It is a requirement that for every shift, there are three shifts a day, there needs to be a documentation sheet for each resident about how their day is going and if anything major is happening. There can be multiple things that happen that need to be documented so if it is deemed important, then it needs to be passed along for other staff to read at a later time so they know what is going on. Something like that will be documented on one of those sheets.

QUESTION: So, with this sheet that you are passing around (from a previous question), what if it were to get out? Can that happen?

PATRICK: Everything about a juvenile in the court is confidential. So that information does not get out. They are all court documents so once we put their name on it and their file number on their file, then it becomes a court document. That is how we train all staff. When we write in it we treat it as a court document. We are not writing opinions, we don't write, “this kid is being a jerk today.” We are writing factual statements, so if you feel that a kid is being a jerk that day, then you have to describe exactly what they are doing that is jerk-ish.

QUESTION: So how do you store all of that information? Do you have file cabinets in locked rooms?

PATRICK: Lots of file cabinets. Once the kid turns eighteen then they have aged out of the juvenile system. So, we keep their file until their eighteenth birthday and then a year beyond. And after a year beyond, I can microfilm that file and then shred the original. So, we take a picture of them and they go on film. They also scan them now. At the county in the past few years they are able to microfilm them and put them on the computer at the same time. So, I have it both ways now.

QUESTION: Is there anything that has to be written on paper or is it all electronic?

PATRICK: We have log books that are on paper. The daily documentation sheets that we keep for all of the residents are on paper. The staff communication and resident communication logs are on paper. Our mental health professionals will come in and fill out a document for the residents' files with any information from their mental health evaluations.

QUESTION: What kind of writing activities do the residents get into? Is it writing? Is it gym? Is it everything that they would get in a school? Or is it very limited what they get to do activity-wise?

PATRICK: They get exercise. Monday through Friday they have what would be the equivalent to gym. They write throughout the day in our program. There is a part of our day that is a structured activity called news notes. So, they watch the news and current events and they write notes on them to learn note-taking skills. There is another activity where they are given a thought provoking question and they have to write a page on it. They all have a journal and every morning they have to write a morning reflection type thing with another thought-provoking question or writing prompt.

QUESTION: You brought some wonderful writing artifacts with you, I would love to learn more about them. Can you describe or expand on them?

PATRICK: I have some examples of court reports. All of our staff have to fill these out for the residents. It is a report of the juvenile's stay up to that point and then those forms go to the court. I also have examples of our incident reports. These are filled out if a special incident happens that requires that the resident be put on a special program, which takes them out of our normal general program, then we write a report about it. And there is foul language in the incident reports, not the court reports, but in the incident reports. For the incident reports that staff write down exactly what happens. So, if a resident says "f--- you" to someone then that is what gets written down. Some of this other stuff is more stuff that I do. I have the letter that all of the parents are given. It basically describes the detention facility and rules for the parents for things like phone calls, mail, and whatnot. I never thought that I would be going into criminal justice and writing a lot, but I do write a lot.

QUESTION: What is the communication like between residents? Is it all talk or do they pass notes?

PATRICK: All talk. There are no notes. Well, they do pass notes, but they get in trouble. There are limits to what they can talk about. So, they are not allowed to talk about criminal activity like alcohol, narcotics, tobacco, sex. Those are topics that are no-go. The reality is that we can't listen 24/7 but if we hear it then they get in trouble. They are not allowed to pass personal information to each other, like phone numbers. And, they are not allowed to be passing notes. But we do get them. It is no different from any other school. You know, we get the ones that say "you're cute" and stuff like that.

QUESTION: How often are you in contact with the courts?

PATRICK: I am in constant contact with the courts. I will be on the phone with them probably three to four times a week. And they will come down sometimes to check things out and they will read the resident documentation sheets. So, that is what those are for.

QUESTION: Can I ask about the court document, because in relation to what we have been talking about in class, this is one of the more interesting artifacts that you brought. I have a couple of questions about it. First, when this was created, who created it? Is it the courts that need to know this specific information working sort of top down? Or is it something that originated at the center?

PATRICK: We came up with it but it gets changed and tweaked based on the courts and what they need. So, if they want to see something different then we will modify the form. But even the information that is in that, going back to when I was in Joliet, that information is all pretty basic.

QUESTION: Okay, and then I just did a quick skim but it looks like the first paragraph is about the violation, the next paragraph about school, the third is behavior, the fourth family and outside contact, and then recommendations. So, that's basic?

PATRICK: That is a basic format when we train staff. Those are the main things that we want to see in the court reports. But obviously, if there is something else that the courts want then we have to change it a little bit.

QUESTION: I love the small details that are more formal. I think that it is really interesting that these parts of formal writing make it into court documents too. Although, I suppose, the language of court is very formal.

PATRICK: This is an example of something for the union. This is a memo of understanding between the administration and the facility and the union

for the staff for something that we recently added. So that's an example of the formal writing that I might do. It is very formal.

QUESTION: Do you have to write any funding proposals or anything like that in your position as the director?

PATRICK: I have to do the budget proposal every year to the county board. That is more of a spreadsheet-type proposal. There are opportunities that come up sometimes and so recently the state had some extra money to spend on any new positions and so I wrote a proposal for an added program supervisor. The state approved it but the county board did not. I have an example of my proposal so I will pass that around. The format is a requirement that the administrative office of Illinois courts wanted. And the reason that it was not approved by the county was because that funds the salary but it would not fund benefits and the county did not want to fund more benefits at the time.

QUESTION: You said that there is schooling, including English, and I know that you are tracking that progression. Do you notice a difference in behavior or their way of verbally communication while practicing this written communication? Do you think that there is a correlation between the two?

PATRICK: We have kids, on average, for four weeks so to see a difference from when they come in and when they leave would be minimal. But the teacher does do initial testing when they come in, and if they are in the facility for more than thirty days, then she will do post-testing. So, we track that kind of stuff to see if they make any kind of advancements. Sometimes the advancement is when they came in they were not in a good mood and they didn't take the test seriously, so maybe their post-test is a little bit more accurate to their grade level and where they are at academically. There is an improvement in the communication sometimes where the kid will open up more. We have a lot of kids come through and a lot of different kinds of kids; they are all different. We have some kids who have poor social skills and poor life skills and sometimes they will be with us for longer than four weeks. So, if they are with us for sixty days then we will notice changes in them. And, unfortunately, we do have kids that come back. I have seen some residents come back five or six times, so I do see them growing up a little bit and I see changes in that.

QUESTION: How is medical treatment and documentation handled?

PATRICK: We fill out a medical questionnaire for every resident when they come in that asks very basic questions. And then our medical, which is provided through the jail, will do a physical and a tuberculosis test on all of the kids. If they are a returning kid, then they might not have to do the TB test. That is all documented. We have medical files that are all handled

by our nursing personnel. And then if there are medications, which a lot of these kids are on, we get them verified by the kids' doctor's office, our medical verifies it, and then we set up med boxes and our staff is responsible for administering the medications and making sure that it is documented that they got the meds.

QUESTION: You said that when you went into criminal justice that you didn't expect it to be so writing intensive.

PATRICK: I didn't. Writing was not my favorite thing in school. My wife is the writer in our family. We do have to write a lot. It is everywhere and I think that in schools, not just universities, they are better at letting you know that you will have to be doing a lot of writing. A lot of the writing that I do isn't what you learn in the classroom; you have to get out there in the job and you learn that way.



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Maddi Kartcheske is a junior at Illinois State University. She is currently working on a major in English with a concentration in Creative Writing and a minor in Civic Engagement and Responsibility. She is also starting her second year as an intern with the ISU Writing Program. Though she's often reading or writing, Maddi also loves listening to podcasts, playing board games, and hanging out with her family. Her dream job is to work as a professor in creative writing or rhetoric and composition.