Andrew Kaufman, an expert on Leo Tolstoy who teaches at the University of Virginia (UVA), has conceived and runs a remarkably successful program in which his UVA students, after studying translations of the classics of Russian literature, facilitate discussion groups with residents of the Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center on the “accursed questions” addressed in those works (e.g., the meaning of life and other metaphysical spiritual questions), focusing on their relevance to the young inmates’ lives. (Yes, the residents are also asked to read these works, and, to all appearances, generally do so.) After an article featuring the “Books Behind Bars: Life, Literature, and Leadership” program was published in The Washington Post, Andy was deluged by requests for interviews with publications of considerably higher circulation than SlavFile. As a mark of our gratitude for his agreeing to talk to us, we have promised to try to ask questions less likely to be put by interviewers with a more general focus. Readers seeking more information about his ideas and program may find it in The Washington Post and National Public Radio interviews. A reading list with study questions for this course is available online. To learn more about Dr. Kaufman and his “Books Behind Bars” program, please visit www.greatbooksbehindbars.org. You can also visit his website: www.AndrewDKaufman.com.

We gather that this program is in high demand from UVA students and detention center residents and that measured results look very promising. What, in your experience with teaching Russian literature, led you to believe that this would be the case?

This class actually came about as a result of my long-time interest in teaching Russian literature to my UVA students in a way that would allow them to connect more deeply with the material. I wanted to make the humanities relevant to them. At one point during this journey, I happened to be invited to lead a class in a prison about The Death of Ivan Ilyich. It was a transformative experience for me, as a teacher and a reader. I saw Tolstoy’s novella in a new light after that experience. My appreciation was enriched precisely because I was encountering the work in an unfa-
miliar environment with an unfamiliar group of people. I likened this to the literary technique of ostranenie—making the familiar appear unfamiliar—as a means of getting readers to attend to what is being described.

I began to think about what would happen if I created a course in which my students were put into a similarly unfamiliar environment and asked to discuss Russian literature with people who come from very different backgrounds. Might they, too, have similar revelations about the literature? And so, that is how my course, “Books Behind Bars: Life, Literature, and Leadership,” at UVA was born. I was not sure four years ago what impact this course would have on university students and the incarcerated youth. Now that I see the impact it has, in fact, been having, I remain convinced that Russian literature can become a vehicle for positive personal transformation and social change for an unusually wide range of readers.

Given the general opinion in the U.S. (not to mention the Russian Federation) that the 19th-century classics are far too ponderous and difficult to appeal to even academically successful young people, did you encounter significant resistance from authorities to putting this program into effect, not to mention funding it? How did you overcome this resistance?

Absolutely I encountered resistance. “Russian literature?” asked the then-superintendent of the Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center when I first pitched the idea to him. “What in the world will our residents get out of it?” But he also was a fairly entrepreneurial guy and decided to take a risk. Having seen the result of a one-day pilot, in which both residents and staff came away energized and intellectually stimulated, he invited me back for the full semester pilot. And then I was invited back again, and then again. We have just completed our fourth year of offering the course, and our third year of offering it at Beaumont Juvenile Correctional Center.

Mutual discovery is what this class is all about.

Was there significant initial class antagonism on the part of the detention center residents to the student discussion leaders, given the elite reputation of UVA? How was this overcome?

Both groups of students brought their stereotypes about the other. Although they did not admit it to themselves, UVA students had many assumptions about “juvenile delinquents”—rough, unintelligent, mean—and the Beaumont residents had their ideas about UVA students—elitist, stuck-up, distant. Both stereotypes were quickly shattered, as my students discovered the residents to be thoughtful, intelligent, respectful, and creative, and the residents saw that my students treated them as peers with something of value to contribute to conversations about literature and life. It was through the power of their growing bonds and authentic conversations with one another that the stereotypes fell away.

The actual factors that may contribute to your popularity and positive outcome with the residents are legion:

1) A distraction from the undoubtedly monotonous life in the center.
2) A feeling of accomplishment for being able to tackle a subject considered difficult and abstruse by the world in general.
3) Respectful treatment and the opportunity to interact with successful (“role model”) peers.
4) The opportunity to discuss and consider alternate takes on real-life questions in a non-judgmental setting.
5) The attraction of the superficial “story line” in the works read.
6) Learning from the various perspectives on the “accursed questions” presented in the works.

Do you have some opinion on how much of your success is due specifically to the qualities of the actual works studied? Would you dare to conduct this program among at-risk teenagers on the outside who are subject to all of the distractions of 21st-century life?

An excellent question, and one I and our researchers of the course think about often. I would say that all of the factors you mentioned play some role in the positive outcomes of the program. To which I would add: wonderful, let’s continue to offer programs to incarcerated youth that have that combination of elements: novelty, opportunities for self-actualization, respect, positive role-modeling, the freedom to discuss topics without the fear of judgment, the possibility for serious self-reflection, and a good story as the foundation of it all.

Regarding Russian literature, I do think the depth of the works, the “accursed questions” they raise, and their foreignness all play an important role in the power of the conversations they generate. Would contemporary urban literature work in the same way? I doubt it, because it is not a stretch. It is a mirror, and these incarcerated youth need opportunities to develop new paradigms and understandings of life, not reinforce the ones they already know.

And as for offering this program to teenagers on the outside, I do not have an answer. We will experiment with that. In the meantime, my hunch is that, yes, it will work. Perhaps differently, but it will work. Why do I think so? Just imagine a teenager—any teenager—who is offered an educational opportunity that contains all of the elements you just listed. They do not get such opportunities very often, even in school. My guess is that it would make an impression and have an impact.
Reading level and familiarity with cultural context do make a difference. It would be disingenuous to assume that all of the residents were comparable in this respect to your UVA students. How do you deal with bringing them up to speed?

That is one of our biggest challenges. A handful—about a third—of the residents are already avid readers. Some have even read Russian novels on the side in their spare time. But the majority are at about a ninth-grade reading level. That is not very high for somebody reading The Death of Ivan Ilyich or Ward No. 6. But it is also not impossible. We make sure that their teachers and librarians at the facility work with them during the week before the residents meet my students. The purpose of these meetings is to assist the residents with basic issues of vocabulary and comprehension.

My students do not always try to “cover” the whole work, but rather try to “uncover” it by focusing on short passages that contain broader themes in the work. By means of such close readings, the residents learn to better appreciate literature as literature, and they are afforded the opportunity to talk about some of the deeper layers of meaning in the work without necessarily having fully mastered the whole thing.

Finally, we try to bring in as much cultural background material about Russia as possible. The residents find this interesting, and it adds a dimension to the fiction with which they can connect. They love to hear Russian spoken and see it written on the page, so much so that at least one of them picked up a copy of Russian for Dummies, of which I am co-author, from the facility library and taught himself to count in Russian!

If the student discussion leaders play a significant role in interpreting works to residents, do you make any effort to make sure the students are all on the same page? (All Slavists have encountered “quirky” interpretations, even among the highly educated.)

My students do not play a significant role in guiding the residents’ interpretation of the works. And they do not “teach.” Their job is to facilitate discussion and creative activities that help the residents develop their own interpretations and connections to the works. My students challenge the residents if they disagree with something they have said, and the residents challenge my students. This is a true community of learners who grapple with texts that are foreign to both of them.

I offer my guidance during the preparation phase of the course, telling students how other scholars have interpreted various works and how I interpreted them, but I leave it at that. Students must develop their own interpretations or, if they are still uncertain, be able to articulate that uncertainty. Only in this way do conversations with the residents remain authentic, rather than staged and “teacherly.” My students learn quickly that no single person or class of people has ultimate authority in the face of such questions. Everybody is engaged as equals in a process of shared inquiry and mutual discovery about literature. And indeed, mutual discovery is what this class is all about.

I notice that there are some of Tolstoy’s simplified didactic works on your reading list. Do you notice a difference in the intensity of resident response to these as compared to the more difficult works?

Yes, the simple fact of the matter is that parable-like works such as Tolstoy’s short story “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” are easier for them to relate to right away than the more complicated ones like Ward No. 6. But part of my students’ task is to point out that “How Much Land?” is indeed a message-driven work, and to challenge the residents to question whether that message is correct.

Slavists know that there are Dostoevsky people and Tolstoy people. Do you find the student and/or resident response to these two writers is significantly different?

I have come to question that division, although I used to believe in it and cited it. It would indeed be interesting to track in a more empirical fashion whether there is some consistency in their reactions to Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. But through my observation I have not found any. Some students who loved the first part of Crime and Punishment (the one novel we read in a previous iter-

More Information on the “Books Behind Bars” Program

Books Behind Bars Facebook Page

“Books Behind Bars: Teaching Tolstoy to Troubled Teens”
http://uvamagazine.org/video/4792
How do you select what you read? Does response to a particular reading influence selection of subsequent ones? I notice that the passage in The Brothers Karamazov where Ivan “gives back his ticket” is not on your list. Have you considered and rejected it? Why?

We did read the first part of Crime and Punishment, and I did not like the fact that we did not continue. We simply would not have had time to read the novel in its entirety, but I wanted them to have a taste of it. That discussion raised a number of fascinating topics of conversation, but it felt unfinished. I resolved after that to only read works that we can finish in their entirety. That is more satisfying for everybody. However, this summer I am beginning a “Books Behind Bars” reading group, which is an extension of the academic program during the academic year, and in this summer program we will spend about seven weeks reading Crime and Punishment in its entirety. If that goes well, then I will move to War and Peace.

How do you select the translation you use? Do you ever ask participants to discuss merits of different translations? Have you ever considered an exercise in which participants modify a translation into their own colloquial language?

Interesting question. I do not tamper with existing translations, although I am aware of one abridged version of Crime and Punishment that does so successfully. It removes chunks of “unnecessary” text and changes the city to New York and the characters’ names as well as some of the language to make it more contemporary. I thought it was well done for what it was and even considered using this version with the residents. In the end, I decided that the residents’ experience of stretching themselves beyond their literary comfort zone is more important than making their reading job easier.

As far as which translations, I choose ones that privilege readability over accuracy. I know that might sound like heresy to some. But the truth is, when dealing with such excellent translators as Aylmer Maude and Louise Maude, Constance Garnett, Richard Pevear, and Larissa Volokhonsky, etc., you are not really losing all that much in terms of accuracy. That is, the translators are not making whopping mistakes that change the whole sense of a scene or the work, but you are gaining immensely if residents are not so put off by a translation that they drop the book altogether. The reward far outweighs the risks in my view.

It is hard for some of us older people not to have the impending Russian Revolution in mind when we read 19th-century Russian literature. Does this come up, or are your students too young for this to be relevant for them?

This theme does not come up too much, and I would like to do a better job of setting these works in their historical context. For example, both UVA students and residents are confused when they learn, say, about Tolstoy’s rejection of capitalism, because they always assumed that Russia was a feudal economy. I try to explain the subtleties, but this is something that often bogs down the conversation rather than propels it forward.

When we discuss Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s novella “Matryona’s Home,” the subjects of the revolution and World War II do come up, since they are specifically mentioned in the text. Many of the residents are already familiar with the Russian Revolution and the advent of socialism, even if they do not know all of the details. As a result, they sense the contradiction between the socialist ideal and what Solzhenitsyn portrays as the reality of life in the Soviet Union. I help give them some context and language to develop these ideas, and in so doing, offer them the chance to talk about different kinds of social systems.

When we discuss Nikolai Gogol’s short story “The Overcoat,” I tell them about Peter the Great’s Table of Ranks, and the residents immediately connect it to the rigid bureaucratic hierarchy of the prison system in which they occupy the lowest rank. But the conversation is more of a social exploration, not a historical one.

Given that this program is being run in Virginia, you may well have some participants who are either the descendants of slaves or of slave owners. Does this issue ever arise in connection with mention of serfdom and peasants, or are passages more focused on more universal accursed questions?

I had a resident who came from a farm in Virginia, and he helped the rest of us understand the details of farming in “How Much Land Does a Man Need?” The idea of slavery has not come up, although residents are quite sensitive to how social stratification works in our country and therefore have a lot to say about this matter in all of the readings.

It would seem to me difficult for believers adhering to a particular religious doctrine to consider the “accursed
questions” raised in these works without reference to this doctrine. One might assume that a significant number of the participants in your programs have this perspective. Does this come up? Does it cause problems, and how do you deal with them?

Many of the residents tend to be very religious—a larger proportion of them, in fact, than my students. And while they often see connections between the ideals of the Russian greats and religious ideals, they are also usually able to separate the two concepts. Their religious upbringing is what helps them to recognize easily some of the themes about compassion and morality in the works we read, and it also causes them great distress, for these discussions make them painfully aware of the difference between how they have lived their lives and how their religion taught them to live.

On the one hand, Russian literature appears to be opening a number of wounds for these kids. But, as Dostoevsky and others understood so well, with the opening of wounds comes the possibility of healing. I think this accounts, in part, for the powerful impact Russian literature has had in helping the residents squarely face the big questions of how they have lived their lives.

Notes
3. A reading list and study questions for “Books Behind Bars” can be found at www.scribd.com/doc/154548098/Andy-s-Reading-List.