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## What Is Changing Lives Through Literature?

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*“This program was a changing point in my life. There were books that I couldn’t put down. They kept me interested in the positive aspects of life.”*

*—John, student,  
New Bedford Men’s Program*

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### HOW IT ALL BEGAN

CHANGING LIVES THROUGH LITERATURE (CLTL) is a program that began in Massachusetts in response to a growing need within the criminal justice system to find alternatives to incarceration. Burdened by expense and repeat offenders, prisons can rarely give adequate attention to inmates’ needs and, thus, do little else than warehouse our criminals. Disturbed by the lack of real success by prisons to reform offenders and affect their patterns of behavior, Robert Waxler, a professor of English, and Judge Robert Kane, at the time, a Massachusetts District Court justice, discussed using literature to reach hardened criminals.

In the fall of 1991, as members of a team that also included Wayne St. Pierre, a New Bedford District Court probation officer (PO), the

group initiated the first program at the University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, where Waxler taught. Eight men were sentenced to probation instead of prison, with an important stipulation: *They had to complete a Modern American literature seminar run by Waxler and held on campus.* Believing that accessibility, language, and a good story were keys to unlocking the imagination, Waxler limited selections for this experiment to American short stories or novels from the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

One of the most important parts of the premise for the program that fueled Waxler and Kane was that the judge and PO St. Pierre would participate alongside the offenders. For twelve weeks, the men, many of whom had not graduated high school and who had 148 convictions among them for crimes such as armed robbery and theft, met in a seminar room at the university. Through a discussion of books, such as James Dickey's *Deliverance* and Jack London's *The Sea Wolf*, the men began to explore aspects of themselves, to listen to their peers, to increase their ability to communicate ideas and feelings to men of authority who they thought would never listen to them, and to engage in dialogue in a classroom setting where all ideas were valid. Instead of seeing their world from only one angle, they began opening up to new perspectives and realized that they had choices in life. They could get out of the cycle of crime. Literature had become a road to insight.

Waxler and Kane realized that they were on to something although at this point, all outcomes were anecdotal:

- Manuel, a small-time drug dealer, stated that “reading opened his mind.” He felt that he could relate to the character Wolf Larsen in *The Sea Wolf*. Manuel soon became drug free and a college student.
- Mark, a former drug abuser, became a full-time college student and credited CLTL with helping to change his outlook: “I learned that Wayne St. Pierre is more than my probation officer—he is a human being. Judge Kane is a human being. They cared about me. That made me care about me and start making the right choices.”

- Walter, who had spent two of his nineteen years in prison, affirmed that the program helped him return to school and want to get his diploma.

Kane and Waxler realized that the Changing Lives program had a powerful effect on the participants. Roles in the outside world were less important in what became “a democratic classroom.” All voices added to understanding the literature, and both felt renewed in their professional life. Judge Kane said, “Any professional, be he or she doctor, social worker, teacher, or judge, is only a complete professional when the knowledge of scholarship is combined with the understanding of practice.”

A year later, Jean Trounstine, a professor of Humanities at Middlesex Community College, heard about the program from a talk by Judge Kane at Framingham Women’s Prison. Trounstine had been working at the prison part-time since 1987, teaching college classes and directing plays, and immediately investigated starting a women’s program with Judge Joseph Dever and PO Valrie Ashford Harris from the Lynn District Court.

Sue, one graduate of the Lynn-Lowell Women’s Program, made a list of her accomplishments after completing the program:

1. Read and completed a book
2. Comprehended others’ point of view on same literature
3. Read books with uncomfortable subject matter
4. Related to characters in book
5. Read for pleasure
6. Expressed my opinions with less fear each time
7. Learned how to take time to focus
8. Different way of life other than AA program and parenting

Success came quickly: By the summer of 1993, with support from the Gardiner Howland Shaw Foundation, forty men had completed the New Bedford course with negligible recidivism and a women’s

program had been added using a combination of the Lynn and Lowell District Courts. In addition, a graduation ceremony had been held in front of a full courtroom. Probationers who had finished a set of CLTL sessions received certificates of completion and praise from the judge, probation officer, and professor. This ceremony, one of the early traditions of CLTL, was symbolic: Success was showered on students in a courtroom, the very same place where they had been sentenced.

The CLTL program received nationwide publicity and program assistance from the Massachusetts Foundation for the Humanities (MFH) in 1994. An early study of the program had indicated it was worth the investment. Comparing thirty-two participants in CLTL with thirty-two similar offenders not in the program, the study found the recidivism rate for CLTL was 19 percent, and for the other group 45 percent. The statistics simply provided hard data for what we had suspected: Engaging in deep discussions about stories can enrich lives, arouse voices, and create change.

In 1994, CLTL received funding from the State Legislature of Massachusetts to expand into courts throughout the state, and in 1996, Texas came on board, as well as Arizona (1998), Kansas (1999), New York (2000), Maine (2001), Rhode Island (2001), and Connecticut (2002). In addition, a version of CLTL has been running successfully in England since 2000. Florida and Indiana are interested in starting programs, and one may be underway soon in Canada. CLTL has won awards and has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Parade* magazine, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and on the *Today show*, as well as in newspapers and on radio and television shows throughout the world. In 2003, CLTL was awarded an Exemplary Education grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to develop a website and training materials to expand its reach, and in that year, it also received support for books and transportation from the MFH. In 2004, the New England Board of Higher Education honored CLTL with its Higher Education Achievement Award.

## OUR PHILOSOPHY

CLTL is based on the idea that literature has the power to transform. Although it sounds simple—essentially a book club or reading group that meets over a period of weeks and is attended by an instructor, probation officers, a judge, and students—CLTL allows us to make connections with the characters or ideas in a text and to rethink our own behavior. The phrase *changing lives* may sound grandiose. But this program can be the first step toward permanent change or an additional step on the path to a new way of being part of the world. CLTL contends that through literature we can more deeply understand ourselves and our human condition.

*It also depends on the old-fashioned idea of a good story and whatever it is that happens to us when we read a worthwhile book or immerse ourselves in a piece of literature.*

But what is it about literature that allows this to occur? And why do many of us who are involved with CLTL feel that it is one of the most underutilized tools in the criminal justice system?

As Waxler says, when we talk about literature, we are not just talking about the words on a page or about a book sitting peacefully on a shelf. It is the material that engages us deeply and enables us to be part of the tale. This way of relating to literature is active. It takes imagination and a willingness to participate. But, it does not necessarily require advanced reading skills or a college degree. Many who have not finished high school have found success in CLTL programs. But for most participants, opening up the heart and mind is as difficult as anything they have ever accomplished. We believe that this is often the first step toward change and toward believing, as Kit, one ex-offender who worked with Trounstine said, “There are other ways of living than the streets.”

This process, which often creates epiphany, depends on material that engages us at a deep level. It also depends on the old-fashioned idea of a good story and whatever it is that happens to us when we read a worthwhile book or immerse ourselves in a piece of literature. If we

are lucky and have been blessed with caregivers who read to us when we were young, or if we were successful in school, we may easily find our way inside a story.

But for many who have never had this experience with a book, CLTL is new and sometimes accompanied by fear, revelations that surprise, or emotions beyond one's expectations. After completing the program, one student from the United Kingdom said:

It has made me realize how I have made people feel by acting and committing the crimes that I have during the past. And the pain I must have caused to all the people who have been affected through my criminal behavior. Not just my family or loved ones who share the pain right to the very end, but the victims as well. Sometimes I wonder at just how much pain I have caused people in my life and when will I finally get this right?

Because the power of transformation through literature can upend us, the group itself is crucial to the process. In a group, participants gain support as they reflect, have the opportunity to hear what others have to say, and ultimately feel less alone in their journey.

As the program developed, each of the CLTL groups throughout Massachusetts and throughout the country diversified, incorporating differences based on the needs of particular courts, student populations, or facilitators' styles. Practitioners each added their own stamp to CLTL. Some CLTL programs met weekly while others met every other week. Some were not able to meet on a college campus so they chose to meet in a library. In some cases, judges were supportive but did not attend classes. Although we originally insisted on all-male or all-female groups, others wanted to explore mixed groups. In spite of these differences, one thing was the same: Everyone saw changes in the participants. Literature was empowering. Discussion enhanced that power. The process of reading led to reflection. Reflection often led to change.

The momentum of the program, expressed in news articles and TV and radio shows, caught the public's attention. In 1998, the University of Notre Dame Press approached Waxler about doing an anthology of readings that were particularly significant for CLTLers. Waxler enlisted Trounstone to help choose sample stories and chapters from novels that were effective with CLTL groups. *Changing Lives Through Literature* (1999) was our response. The book organizes readings around subjects that often allow our students to delve more deeply into their own psyches through the safety of story. These selections span a range of thematic issues, touching on identity/voice, violence, love and friendship, and family. We discovered that we each saw things a bit differently in terms of readings and believed that our single-gendered groups would each respond somewhat differently to the selections included. Trounstone selected work by women authors, and Waxler chose selections by men. At the end of each selection in our book, we comment on these texts and offer written responses. As often occurs in a CLTL class, we wanted our responses to open the way for others to share their understandings and encourage their own ways of seeing.

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Since it is an anthology, this first book does not explore the ideas behind CLTL. As the program grew, more and more people became interested in understanding the inner workings of CLTL. Thus, *Finding a Voice* was born. Where we once gave readers a chance to enter texts and respond with us, we now explore how these voices are heard and how that empowerment helps to change lives. *Finding a Voice* lays out the why, what, and how, and shows you, in practical terms, methods as well as dreams and desires.

From the anthology we co-edited, Waxler touches on why story is so powerful and hints at what makes it so profound a tool:

When my son Jonathan was young, I would make up cowboy stories for him at bedtime. Cowboy Jonathan became a character of endless adventure, riding off to meet his next challenge, returning home weary, yet always ready for another journey out. We were never certain what would happen to Cowboy Jonathan when he set out on any particular night, but we cared about him, rooted for him, felt his danger, and celebrated his triumphs. He became part of our collective memory, and we carried traces of his story wherever we went.

That particular story provided a way for Waxler and Jonathan to dream together, to defeat enemies, and to be heroic. The story allowed father and son to live inside the imagination. It allows this for all of us.

But what of readers who have not read much, who have had their imaginations stifled, or have had poor experiences with school? Many CLTL students struggle through books and think they have retained

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little of the text. They often are the first ones to say the book had no meaning. But in our discussions, where we sit around the table talking about the text and together recreate the story, where we refashion its travails and its successes, where we look into why the

characters do what they do, and where we reconsider their actions, these readers often find that, far more than they ever imagined, they have heard something in the story and found that a book stays inside them. A character touches a familiar chord, or a story allows them to rethink their own experiences.

Through reading, we see; through discussion, we hear. The CLTL discussion is as important as the reading. Reading on our own, the imagination comes alive through an engagement with language. In the classroom, language can lead to improved verbal and listening skills. As we hear others talk about their experience with the text, and

as we talk about the characters with those who may see the world far differently than we do, we experience a paradox: We begin to see perspectives other than our own and, at the same time, we realize that our lives have brought us unique insights. A good story not only calls on us to exercise our minds, it asks us to reach deep into our hearts and evoke compassion for the characters, for each other, and for ourselves.

Much has been written about how stepping inside another's shoes opens us up, even frees us. We are able to consider even the most awful human actions through a character and come to grips with our own most dreadful experiences through someone else's story. There is safety in the CLTL classroom precisely because the story seems to be about someone else. The word *seems* is important. Whether we identify fully or just see parts of ourselves and those we know in the characters we meet, the CLTL discussion enables us to process our own experiences without confessing. Another paradox: CLTL is not therapy, although the process of learning about our lives can be therapeutic. This is what we mean by *transformational*: CLTL is based on the idea that literature has the power to transform lives.

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Every CLTL program is different, as you will discover browsing through this book, but all have this in common: literature, discussion, and a plurality of voices. The literature may be a stepping-off place, or it may be the meat and potatoes of the class. All of the programs are connected to the Socratic notion that “the unexamined life is not worth living. . . .” We reach out to offenders who have the motivation to change behavior that has caused them to end up as statistics in the criminal justice system. Through literature, we ask participants in CLTL to explore their identity, and the result is often their way out of crime.

I don't know if it's a turning point, but to read about Frederick Douglass and how a little thing like reading and writing can so profoundly change someone's life, and how I take it so much for granted, makes you wonder what else I'm taking for granted, things like freedom. It will make me think my decisions through before I act on them.

*Student, Dorchester, Massachusetts Men's Program*



## THE TEAM CONCEPT

CLTL has as a premise a team of three who are behind every CLTL student: the facilitator, the probation officer, and the judge. The program is unique because there are four *equal* voices around the table.

### The Student

I received a new path from this class, of thinking ability. The doom of embitterment is closed and a window of wisdom opened.

*Student, Dorchester, Massachusetts Women's Program*

The *student* is the lynchpin of CLTL. Without students, there would be no program. The students in CLTL classes can be sentenced from the bench by a judge or found among clients at a particular court by a probation officer. Many of our programs offer some time taken off the probation sentence, and some offer a fee reduction, but this all depends on each court's rules and sentencing guidelines.

We serve both men and women, most often in same-sex groups, and the students in our adult programs have been as young as seventeen and as old as seventy-five. Most of our students have prior records. Many have served jail time. What seems important for success in the program is the degree of willing participation in CLTL; while courts may strongly recommend CLTL, ultimately, participation is voluntary.

Many of our students have physical, emotional, and/or sexual abuse in their backgrounds. Most come from poor or working-class families

and are struggling to make ends meet. Many students arrive as avid readers. Reading abilities and interest in reading vary enormously from town to town and within an individual program. Some programs serve towns with primarily African-American populations, whereas other programs are racially diverse or exist in primarily white communities. CLTL students are expected to treat each other civilly in the classroom and

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respect the rights of all group members. The students often have many issues they must deal with while on probation, along with attending the CLTL program: jobs, housing, relationships, family, health, substance abuse, sexual orientation, stress, and, often, sheer survival. The classroom is expected to be a place where we all come together.

Students are expected to live by the rules of their probation officers and/or their facilitators. In most cases, they attend all classes and do all of the reading. Some students bring notes to class so that they can be more active in the discussion. Others reread parts of a book just before they come to class. Many share the books with family members and talk about them long after class. We expect that many of the characters in these texts will touch our readers and that many of the themes in the readings will have meaning for their lives. As one of the students from the Woburn, Massachusetts Men's Program said: "I am in a very labor-intensive job, and to have some intellectual stimulation to wind down the day, to say to myself I'm worth more than humping furniture and drinking with the guys sort of calms me and soothes the soul." In some programs, offenders are able to substitute CLTL discussion group meetings for meetings with their probation officer.

What is true for all students is that they need to be willing to assume some responsibility for their choices and to allow the program process to take hold. Success means not bailing out when a book is hard to understand. Success means reading the book even if it seems irrelevant to one's life right now. Success means not giving up.

Kim came to CLTL with a long record. She had done prison time. She had been strung out on drugs for longer than she wanted to remember. She could hold a job, but she was often secretive, got high at work, was engulfed in her own life and impervious to others, and couldn't manage a good relationship. Most of the men she was attracted to were abusive, abrasive, or not interested in much besides drinking and drugging. Kim had grown up in Lowell, Massachusetts, and had a tough demeanor. From the things she said during the CLTL classes, it was clear that her childhood had been rough, with a divorce and court involvement beginning in her teens.

After fourteen weeks (seven sessions of CLTL), Kim wrote about how she had changed as a result of the sessions:

I've been able (to allow myself) to share my feelings—to be able to express them as they come up. . . . I've changed my personal attitude about expressing myself. I feel comfortable. I feel sincere. I feel and see myself changing. A lot of self-awareness—how opinionated, how extreme, how vulnerable.

After CLTL, Kim went on to Middlesex Community College and she graduated. She continued in a B.A. program in psychology at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell, and she kept up with Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous. She met a man and fell in love, got married, bought a house, became a stepmother, and had her own children. None of these steps was easy for Kim. She struggled every inch of the way to stay off drugs and alcohol, to keep perspective, and to handle her emotions. She took some important steps in CLTL on her road to a better life.

First, she allowed herself to learn and to be open to the process of reading and reflecting during the sessions. This is no easy feat, for many come into the program ready to fight and others believe that everything they have to say is worthless. It is not easy to allow oneself to feel the small successes: a book read, an idea praised, or another

class attended. Kim, like many of the women in CLTL, was a few months clean and sober at her inception, and she had an earnest desire to stay that way. As she says, she allowed herself to share. Trounstein remembers how surprised Kim was when Judge Dever, a man she never imagined would give her the time of day, actually listened to her intently as she discussed her reactions to Anne Tyler's character Pearl in *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. Kim said she understood and admired Pearl. She was a woman who had raised her children by herself, in spite of a man who left her. Dever agreed. Perhaps Kim recognized something of her own mother in Pearl, but what seemed most important was Kim's demeanor—a broad smile, an almost shy “Yeah?”—as Dever nodded his head in recognition. Kim felt acknowledged. Another success.

Kim used CLTL in the best possible way and added Trounstein to the support group she was gathering around her. She already had found a counselor she turned to when she needed emotional support and a program administrator she had met at Framingham Prison. She always stayed in touch with her supporters, keeping it clear to herself that she was headed toward a healthy life. When she got married, she invited them all to her wedding, along with friends from AA. Part of Kim's success in CLTL was an understanding that she was part of a community and that she had the power to build that community.

Success in CLTL is not always as obvious as it is with Kim, who still writes an occasional letter or calls to keep in touch, to share news of a new baby or a new move. It is often in the smallest moments that someone has an epiphany: Reading begins with a paragraph and continues with one page and then five pages. Coming to class with notes taken can bring pride and engender the willingness to find another book by the same author from the library. Listening also takes willingness, and the result can be understanding someone else's perspective. Success is admitting that you hated the book but finished it anyway. Success is completing something you never

believed you could complete: a book, a session, sharing a piece of yourself.

Failures often come amidst the successes. A woman fails to make a class, and she knows she could have come if only she'd pushed herself, but she just can't leave the house. Maybe she needed that day to recover from a loss or a child's illness. Certainly, if it is a pattern, it will keep her from completing CLTL. But maybe for this woman, the missed class is an anomaly. And maybe if she had come to class, she would have gone out and gotten high afterward.

Learning doesn't always come in a rush with success after success. It has ups and downs. Understanding this process can enable true success. There are times when failure can lead to a new awareness or a renewed sense of recommitment. Failure in CLTL can stem from simply not being ready to do the reflection required of students who stay in the program. But it can also begin a process of self-examination.

Although CLTL is for students who have had trouble with the law, many learners, like Kim, lost their way when they were young or have not flourished in traditional school settings. We recognize that this book will serve students who come from all walks of life and practitioners who aim to create reading programs for students in halfway house, juvenile settings, school programs, and book groups where performance is not measured by grades. If you want to learn to read more deeply, the techniques and ideas in *Finding a Voice* will enable reading to touch your heart, enliven your spirit, and educate you about your surroundings, yourself, and others.

### **The Facilitator**

[The purpose of Changing Lives Through Literature] is to inspire others to re-create themselves in a way that is contributory to the human experience and, in that way, to be an inspiration.

*Cherie Muehlenberg, facilitator, Kansas Program*

The *facilitator* brings love of literature to the table, enables the discussion, provokes the discussion, sometimes structures the discussion and at other times allows it to flow freely. We chose the term *facilitator* because it does not imply a podium and, by discouraging a lecture format, it encourages equal participation among participants. While most of our facilitators are college professors, they do not impose an agenda on the classroom or insist on one meaning for a text. Facilitators are ready with questions and ways to stimulate conversation, but their goal is to find practices that engage students in the literature, characters, and themes and to uncover questions that come from the texts. While the methods and strategies vary from classroom to classroom and teacher to teacher, the emphasis on involving the student is the same and is key to success.

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*A passion for literature and discussion as well as a belief in language help to inspire the CLTL process, so it is important to find facilitators who exhibit that commitment and understand the CLTL population.*

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Often the team member who has had the least contact with criminal offenders, the facilitator understands and appreciates the close ties between literature and life and can bring deep insights to the discussion table. He or she must also rely on the probation officer and the judge for information and guidance outside of the classroom.

In a sense, the facilitator represents the alternative being offered to the offender through the reading and discussions on the college campus. The responsibility for choosing the books, facilitating the literary discussions, determining an approach to meetings, and arranging the logistics on the campus falls to the instructor. A passion for literature and discussion as well as a belief in language help to inspire the CLTL process, so it is important to find facilitators who exhibit that commitment and understand the CLTL population.

Taylor Stoehr, facilitator of the Dorchester Men's Program, says that "the educational sorting and labeling system put its 'rejected' stamp on most of [the offenders] long ago, withholding the rewards that more docile pupils collect after investing twelve to twenty years in school. Although we might wish to solve their personal, social, and economic problems by trying once again to put them through the mill, like flawed products bumped off the conveyor belt, it's not going to happen." He calls this "the shadow of schooling" and says it's important for facilitators to recognize this as we make programmatic decisions.

The facilitator's role includes deciding on the logistics and rules with other team members, such as how many weeks the course will meet, where best to hold the class, and how to deal with tardiness or absence. Most facilitators have a college or university affiliation and arrange to have CLTL programs meet on campus. Unaffiliated instructors arrange for libraries or other non-court arenas to be settings for the course: Some classes are held in community corrections centers and a few in prisons. But, the important thing here is that the facilitator should be involved in these decisions if possible because the more the instructor functions as part of a team, the more he or she will be invested in the program.

The number of sessions planned will be crucial in determining the kind of reading material. Some groups prefer six meetings over a period of twelve weeks; others meet seven or eight times over fourteen or sixteen weeks. Some meet every week for ten or twelve sessions; most groups, however, meet every other week. If you meet frequently, you'll want short stories; however, many groups use novels. Choosing the books also means thinking about goals for each class, choosing the ideas to focus on during those meetings and the issues that will grab the students during their week away. Most facilitators do not know the details of their students' crimes, but knowing some of the general characteristics of a group may help make better selections (see Chapter 7).

We recommend you choose texts that allow participants to reflect on their own experiences through the characters. This means you will

pick texts that resonate with you, that have allowed you to think more deeply about yourself and your surroundings. Unless you are engaged in the literature you choose, you cannot engage others. We recognize that not all of our sample texts will be the best choices for your CLTL program, but we have an extensive list included on pages 152–55 and 186–89. Your excitement about the literature you have chosen will help you to get others involved in the reading.

A good instructor needs to be an improviser. When comments take you in a direction you weren't prepared for, when a student seems like he or she hasn't understood the book, or when the book you've chosen falls flat, you must make quick but thoughtful decisions on how to handle the situation. Your ability to bring ideas and feelings out of the group and to stimulate thinking is at the core of an effective CLTL session.

A CLTL facilitator understands he or she is teaching the piece from one or more perspectives but realizes that other voices in the room are valid and bring their own way of seeing the text. A successful instructor draws out this diversity, learns over time how to capitalize on it, and allows the text to be the teacher. One facilitator from the Maine program remarked:

Few college courses have engaged my mind as compellingly as these discussion programs with these probationers. They have offered extraordinary insights into the powerful literature used in the program. I leave sessions excited about the transformative capacity of great writing.

CLTL is a way of looking at literature and listening to others' insights. It is choosing literature with themes that resonate for a group, and speaks to students' underlying issues. It is finding ways to engage the disengaged, give voice to those who feel unheard, and include those who have felt disenfranchised by our social system. CLTL is as much a way of approaching a discussion about literature as it is a list of texts; and its methods can be used with groups that have members from diverse cultures, opinions, and backgrounds.

You'll find many areas in this book that will help you more deeply understand the role of a CLTL instructor. The material in Teaching Specific Texts (Chapters 8 and 9) will be invaluable to you. There you'll find guides and lesson plans. Also consult Chapter 10, CLTL Teaching Strategies. Browse Chapter 7, Starting a Program, to get an understanding of the process and what to do if you need to get a program off the ground. Chapters 2 and 3 will help you understand different perspectives on some of the variety of issues you'll face and the range of perspectives from our facilitators. On our website, <http://ctl.umassd.edu>, you will also find a Discussion Forum where you can engage with others in topics or ask questions about CLTL. We hope this discussion board will reinforce CLTL's subtle insistence on looking at literature in more than one way.

There is nothing like learning from experience. Each of us brings our own personal experiences to a text and thus comes up with our own interpretations and methods of making that text come alive. Each of us can be a good instructor unique to the program. This is one of the founding principles of CLTL and a key to our success. As Trudy Schrandt, facilitator of the Wrentham, Massachusetts Program, says: "To see a person change [in CLTL] before my eyes is one of the most fulfilling things that has happened to me in my life."

### **The Probation Officer**

Over the course of probation, a certain amount of trust is generated between the probationer and the probation officer. But for those who've been through the CLTL program, a much higher level of openness prevails. And it works both ways. Listening to each other talk about what they've read shows all the participants...that we're not so far apart.

*PO Wayne St. Pierre, New Bedford, Massachusetts Program*

In a CLTL program, the *probation officer (PO)* connects the court to the classroom. Most often, it is the probation officer who locates

potential students or obtains referrals from fellow POs and who spends the most time getting to know each student's history and background. The probation officer determines if a potential student is appropriate for CLTL by asking a series of questions. Can the person understand the literature? Is she at a place in her sobriety that would make her able to participate in this program? Will there be job conflicts? Is the student motivated to take on CLTL? Does he have too many personal issues that will get in the way of participating in the program?

To answer the first question, many probation officers use a simple reading test to determine if the student is capable of digesting the material. This can be as easy as asking the client to read a magazine article or having a brief discussion as to what the student likes to read.

The probation officer also works with the judge in the courts, talks with prosecutors and defense attorneys about the CLTL candidates, makes recommendations to the bench, draws up appropriate contracts and rules for eligible offenders, and supervises program participants, offering encouragement and praise when appropriate and recommending sanctions when necessary.

Initially, the probation officer is the team member to whom the offender looks for advice and trust. She or he joins in the literature discussions each session. The facilitator looks to the PO for feedback on the reading and discussions; the judge looks to the PO for recommendations and guidance.

Once the sessions begin, the probation officer follows up with a student who misses a class and decides or advises on the student's continued participation in the program. Most probation officers set up rules for offenders' participation and maintain contracts and/or attendance logs.

The probation officer is the person most likely to know the story of the offender, and in this sense, is central to the team effort. He or she may be responsible for helping the offender with other aspects of life, such as job interviews, therapy, family issues, and applying for school programs. All of these commitments interact with the student's suc-

cess, and no one knows this better than the probation officer. Many probation officers view the opportunity to participate in CLTL as a way to see their clients in a new light.

In some courts, probation officers also bring in members of the community to add to the voices around the table. Reverend Matt Gibson, a community support person in Dorchester, has testified on our website that CLTL can “bring people back into the community. There are a lot of men in the program with whom I’ve had the opportunity to work and who are in my neighborhood yet don’t feel connected to it.”

As a probation officer, your involvement in this program is central to its success. By attending sessions, reading all the selections, and participating in discussions, the probation officer serves as a role model in the best possible way. That is, by sharing what you see in a text, offenders look to you for your reactions concerning the texts and also to see how you think. They want you to listen to them and to appreciate their ideas, insights, and reflections. It is important that you challenge ideas in the classroom with your honest assessment of the reading material. Often, it is the tension among ideas that initiates a discussion, and the probation officer can be effective in the role of initiator.

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A probation officer may work with a judge to arrange for the graduation ceremony to take place in the courtroom. You may also receive program referrals from the bench. Some will perform follow-up studies to see how the participants are doing after the program. As PO Wayne St. Pierre has said, the probation officer’s job can be difficult in terms of balancing the sometimes paradoxical requirements of the courtroom and the literature seminar.

Throughout this book, you’ll find some useful materials. Go to Starting a Program (Chapter 7) to learn more about how to initiate a program. Two program prototypes are provided (Chapters 4 and 5). Sample forms, a Discussion Forum, and other materials from POs

experienced in the CLTL program are available online at <http://cltl.umassd.edu>. Consider reading some of the essays under Key Issues.

Changing Lives Through Literature is one of the best programs we have in Dorchester District Court, mainly because it changes everyone's lives. . . . It's a program where, through literature, people look at their behavior and sometimes, this may be for the first time.

*PO John Christopher, Dorchester District Court*

### The Judge

You can either give someone a fish or you can teach them to fish on their own. With CLTL we are teaching them to fish.

*The Honorable K. Randall Hufstetler, 300<sup>th</sup> District Court, Texas*

In CLTL, the judge gives judicial authorization, serves as a role model for the clients and, ideally, participates in the CLTL sessions as fully as his or her schedule allows.

Without the judge's approval, a traditional CLTL program (for offenders sentenced from the bench or referred by probation) cannot take place. Since the judge gives the CLTL process legitimacy within the judicial system, he or she must be willing to publicly sign on and support the CLTL effort. This takes courage, in part because other judges may not support the idea. Judges who participate in CLTL start out with the belief that literature can be a means to changing offenders' behaviors; they are important in supporting the probation officer's involvement. Judges also highlight the connection between the university and the courtroom.

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While the probation officer often chooses clients from a dossier of probationers, in many courts, the judge senses that a man or woman would be suitable for CLTL and then sentences this person to the program. Often a good CLTL candidate is recognized in the courtroom. As the Honorable Joseph Dever, Presiding Justice of the Lynn District Court in Massachusetts, says, a good candidate may be an offender with “a minimum degree of literacy and a maximum degree of motivation.” On the bench, a judge may conclude that an effective sentence will involve CLTL.

Once the program is underway, the judge attends many of the CLTL sessions, and becomes a role model for the students by demonstrating a personal involvement with the literature. He or she is a regular member of the reading group, sharing insights and honestly depicting his or her appraisal of characters and themes. Many judges talk about how the program has affected their understanding of their own role or of the ability of literature and literature discussions to foster change in so many of the probationers. By listening to the ideas of the men or women on probation, many of whom feel ignored by authority or unable to believe in themselves, the judge gives credit to their opinions and, thus, to their lives. By sharing his or her views, the judge provokes discussion, enables thought, and helps facilitate the turnaround that occurs in many CLTL students. The judge “steps off the bench,” as the Honorable Joseph Reardon, First Justice of Barnstable District Court in Barnstable, Massachusetts, says. He means that the judge becomes more than a symbol of authority; he becomes an equal group member. By participating in the program, each judge, says Reardon, is an “exemplar of justice, a proponent for personal growth and change.”

The judge is encouraged to attend as many literature sessions as possible after sentencing has taken place, given his or her schedule restraints. Some judges attend all the sessions; others attend a few; still others attend sessions at which the judge’s presence is deemed to be most important by the team. It is clear from the testimonials found throughout the book that the judge’s involvement is key to

program success. They also see their clients with more clarity after participating in CLTL, and they can help facilitators and probation officers with perspective:

By reading great books and identifying with the characters in these books, for the first time in their lives, [probationers] begin to look at life objectively instead of subjectively.

*The Honorable Joseph Dever, Lynn District Court*

Judges lead CLTL graduations, which are often a public recognition of the students' success in the judge's courtroom, and they may adjust sentencing for the offenders. Some judges feel a reduction of the probation sentence is appropriate for those who successfully complete the CLTL program, and some judges reduce court fees. Judges may decide that students who have not completed the program can retry later sessions of CLTL. Others see students who fail to live up to their CLTL probation contracts return to their courtroom to have reduced sentences revoked.

The judge also serves initially as a symbol of humane and just authority as the CLTL sessions move forward. In this sense, the judge should be someone who clearly projects power, but who also has a keen sense of justice and flexibility. Like good literature, the judge can be a continuous reminder of the importance of creating a meaningful community.

In general, the judge's commitment to the CLTL program and willingness to talk about it to other judges and court officials are important measures of future success for the CLTL start-up. The judge is central to the growth of the program and is often a strong CLTL advocate.

If you are considering initiating a program, you will discover the number of judges who are committed to CLTL and will read what other judges have to say about it. Most important to launching a program, talk to other judges through e-mail or during telephone conversations. Many judges are listed on the website at <http://cltl.umassd.edu>.

If you are a judge initiating the program, finding an instructor is relatively easy. Approach your local university or community college. Many teachers are looking for a chance to be involved in a program like CLTL. Finding the right probation officer means looking for someone who will appreciate literature. Possibly an instructor or probation officer has come to you. If you can, observe an existing CLTL program.

Chapters 2 and 3 will help you understand different perspectives on some of the variety of issues you'll face. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will clarify the way CLTL interacts with the judiciary more clearly. For more information, browse our individual program homepages online. If you love to read and recognize how important it is to change thinking in order to change behavior, you may join the ranks of other judges who feel like Judge Dever: "Changing Lives Through Literature is the joy of my judgeship." Many find that CLTL has not only affected their clients' lives, but theirs as well.

I . . . have become reinvigorated and vested with new zeal for our work in the trial court as we realize that we are part of a rebirth of critical thinking and decision making by our probationers.

*The Honorable Joseph Reardon, First Justice  
Barnstable District Court*

## AFTER CLTL

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In this book you will also find more testimonials that show how so many who have been involved with CLTL find renewed enthusiasm and deeper connections with themselves. Teachers, probation officers, and judges—team members—all continue to talk about how much the program changes them. As a result, we have included many voices drawn from our website who bring their unique perspectives on issues, teaching techniques, and CLTL premises.

But finding one's own voice is most important for our students, who struggle to get beyond their own self-definitions and create meaningful lives. Among these pages we include participants with their ups and downs as they struggle and succeed in the program, to show you the longing most feel for better lives. Tapping into this longing is in many ways what CLTL is all about. We recognize that we are often just a beginning and that our students may not connect deeply to their experience in CLTL until years later. Our students are our most reliable voices. They show us where we triumph and where we falter. And when they stay in touch, go back to school, find work they are proud of, and create relationships they know aren't easy, years later they sometimes write to tell us about how in reflection, CLTL helped them find a voice. Here is a part of one such letter from Kim, the woman from the Lynn-Lowell Women's Program:

The class didn't mean much to me while I was attending. My reason for joining was a suggestion as a way of making my weekly probation appointments. I was working at the time and could not schedule the appointments during work hours. In retrospect, I'm glad I attended. I don't know how much the books, the reading, and the discussions benefited me. What I "took home" from the class was a sense of belonging, of fitting in, of not feeling so lonely and isolated in society. Being released from prison after eighteen months is very scary. Especially to someone who can't admit they have fears. Someone who has pretended to have confidence and courage for so long that the real insecure scared person can't admit it. This group was a connection. A bond with other women who all acted one way and felt totally another. I wasn't alone.

... After giving this some thought, I also realize there was another important aspect to this group. The judge, probation officer, and teacher—all authority figures to us—they were all there for us, to listen to us, guide us, and direct us. It was their belief in the program and us that helped

me deal with a lot of shame. They respected me until I could learn to respect myself . . . never pushed me or directed me, but somehow . . . inspired me to return to school. To attend classes with people half my age who had no criminal background . . . inspired me to believe I could do it as well as them, if not better, and I did.