

Growing Pains: Developing Collective Efficacy in the Detroit Theory Group

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Abstract

We describe the process of developing a “Think Tank,” or discussion and outreach group for individuals who successfully completed the inside–out Prison Exchange classes offered at a Level 2 correctional facility in Detroit, Michigan in 2008. We employ the concept of “collective efficacy” and members’ own accounts of their experiences to describe the Theory Group’s evolution: (a) formation and initial growth, (b) public outreach, and (c) workshops, trainings, and future activities. We document the complicated dynamics of working with prison officials and make suggestions for those seeking to continue the inside–out dynamic beyond the classroom.

Keywords

inside–out prison exchange program, collective efficacy, think tank

Introduction

The Detroit Theory Group (TG) was established in 2008 as a prison-based discussion and outreach group, modeled on the SCI Graterford “Think Tank,” the alumni group from the original inside–out (IO) Program in Pennsylvania.

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As its processes matured, TG members conceived, planned, and executed a series of successful public events. Simultaneously, group members began to develop more trust and greater cohesiveness as an allied unit. These experiences contributed to their sense of “collective efficacy” (Williams & Guerra, 2011).

In the pages that follow, we describe the formation and evolution of the group’s identity and collective efficacy, to provide useful insights and guidance for others. This article is especially timely as IO programs proliferate across the country and internationally, and as local groups seek to form their own “Think Tanks.” We highlight the unique aspects and context of this group, recognizing that modifications will be necessary for replication in other locales. In addition, we raise questions concerning the tensions between reflection and action, and the boundaries between education and activism, which groups must address to move the IO method and message beyond individual classes.

Background: A Brief History of IO Michigan

In the fall of 2007, University of Michigan–Dearborn sociologist, Lora Lempert, taught the first IO Prison Exchange class in the State of Michigan at Detroit Correctional Facility¹ for men. This was a Level II security facility housing 1,200 plus incarcerated men, one of only two prisons operating within Detroit, a feature that made it a particularly appealing location for IO. Of individuals released from Michigan prisons in 2003, a total of 3,702 inmates returned to two Detroit zip codes, and 34% returned to Wayne County (MI-CURE, August 2004). Detroit Correctional was also the “home” of the National Board of the National Lifers of America (NLA), the only legally recognized prisoner-initiated organization in the state. The then-Director of the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC) was also supportive of this facility selection.

The origins of the IO program for men actually began with incarcerated women. In 2006, the American Association of University Women awarded their Progress in Equity Award and a US\$5,000 honorarium to a college program that Lempert had initiated in a women’s correctional facility. The women, from Chapter 1014 of the NLA, were often incarcerated “behind a man”—having killed abusive husbands, aided, and abetted a male partner’s criminality, or “stupidly helped” drug addicted men—voted unanimously to use the money to “take it to the men.” As recognition of the generosity of these women, Lempert focused the first IO recruitment class on male lifers and the NLA. Lifers have long been recognized as a stabilizing force in

prisons (George, 2010; Hassine, 2009; Pollock, 2002; Rhodes, 2004; Toch, 1977) and, consequently, are well situated to “spread the word” to their peers about the program’s legitimacy.

This first class had 27 applicants, most from the NLA. The second class, offered by sociologist Paul Draus in Fall, 2008, had 35 applicants. All the ensuing classes have averaged 90+ applicants for the 15 class slots. Criteria for application are simply a ninth grade or higher score on the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE) reading test, no criminal sexual conduct convictions, and a willingness to forego visits and other activities for class meetings.

From the men who apply, instructors choose 30 potential participants through either a random selection (Lempert) or through the content of written applications (Draus). Each class instructor then interviews each of the 30 applicants and individually selects 15 for participation in the class. Selection is based on flexible criteria, but often on the applicant’s intellectual curiosity, questioning, and engagement in the interview. For example, when asked if they like to read, some applicants shrug and respond, “I don’t have a problem with it.” While others light up and say, “I read all the time.” Tending to choose fewer of the “no problem with it” applicants, we also seek a range of behavior styles (shy vs. outgoing), racial/ethnic and age variation, representativeness in time served, and diversity in life perspectives. Beyond the CSC exclusion, we never consider the reason for any applicant’s incarceration as a factor in selection.

While self-selected through volunteer application, IO students and TG members (IO alumni) reflect the broad composition of the facility population. Many enter the classes with reading and writing skills honed through years of practice, and, often, they are self-taught as writers. Many are sensitive about their skills in these areas, and, at times, may overcompensate through use of elevated vocabulary. Both the IO classes and the TG projects are closely mentored by the instructors for careful and precise language usage and for clarity in concept and theory articulation. The TG members, whose voices populate this narrative, not only reflect some characteristics of the general incarcerated population, but they also demonstrate a language sophistication and academic discourse that has developed through the additional 5 years of theoretical engagement in the group. They have learned to “talk that talk.”

Outside students, who are drawn from the University of Michigan–Dearborn, are integral to the success of both the IO program and the TG. They are also required to apply and interview individually for selection. Many of them leave the IO class reportedly “transformed.” Most move on to the pressing exigencies of their lives; that is, to labor force participation, graduate school, the armed services, etc. However, some request a continued

direct connection to IO through the TG. As the TG has grown, evolved, and stabilized, there has been little need to actively recruit outside members from new classes.

Currently, when an outside TG member leaves the group, instructors identify interested students from recent classes. The present TG members will then interview the applicant, focusing on his/her education and social justice perspectives, time/life constraints, willingness to make an extended commitment to the group, and personal motivation to join. The group then votes on acceptance or rejection. The IO classes operate under a policy of semiconfidentiality, and the same is true for the TG. Only first names or nick names (no last names) are used. Nonetheless, the names that are used in this article are used with their permission.

Formation of the Theory Group

Following the completion of the first IO Prison Exchange class in 2007, Lora Lempert was asked to join the National Inside–Out Steering Committee. She turned to her students as the only IO Michigan alumni for their support, expertise, and ideas. Simultaneously the “inside” inaugural class students were experiencing the typical response to the conclusion of *any* IO course—withdrawal. “*When IO ended in December 2009 sadness overwhelmed me. One might even say that I was heartbroken*” (Elton).

Prisons, as Goffman (1961) noted over 50 years ago, are the “least intellectual of places,” and IO disrupts that critical thinking vacuum (p. 84). The experience of structured, intellectual engagement results in a desire for “more.” Inside students consistently report that the IO engagement is “humanizing,” and the lack of educational opportunities beyond IO is experienced as an unanticipated loss. According to Charles, an alumnus of the first class, “[*Instructors and outside students*] treated the inside students as human beings with dignity and respect, this new emotional attachment made the inside students want more.” Thus, the inside students’ institutional knowledge and expertise, as well as their desire for more, led to the establishment of the TG.

The original TG was composed of inaugural class *inside* students and a few selected *outside* students from the same class. Lempert presented a proposal to the warden of Detroit Correctional for a monthly meeting to continue the IO theoretical discussions, as well as to discuss and comment upon initiatives and ideas raised by the National Steering Committee. The warden and deputy warden both supported the group’s formation and guaranteed all inside TG members “hold status,” so that no one would be transferred without offense. With assurance of a stable population of inside students, this administrative commitment has remained intact through TGs 5-year existence.

From the beginning, the TG was committed to personal, educational growth through collective discussion and exchange. Theoretical discussions began with in-depth analyses of Goffman's (1961) concept of *Total Institutions*. TG members began to rethink their carceral experiences through Goffman's theories. Group members came to value this analytic approach to their situations. This intellectual engagement evolved into personal and group empowerment, as participants began to perceive institutions as impersonal machinations designed to control individuals and limit their abilities to define themselves. Along similar lines, they reintegrated course readings by Mills (1959) on the "sociological imagination" as they began to view imprisonment as each person's *private trouble* while recognizing mass incarceration and its corollary, "tough on crime," as *public issues*. At the same time, TG members also critically acknowledged that Goffman "didn't get it all" as they noted gaps in race, class, gender, and sexual orientation in his analysis. With feminist and critical race theory readings, they began to think about the concept of "intersectionality" (Crenshaw, 1995). Into this mix, which was happenstance at best, they also read Marx as foundational to further studies.

The account provided by Rick, a student in the second class, articulates the emergence of this critical and analytical perspective, beginning with the IO class and extending into the TG:

After completing the course in 2008, I noticed how the world didn't seem as familiar as it once did. This provoked me to reflect on and compare my way of thinking before participating in I/O to my new found way of rationalizing and weighing concepts in my mind. I realized what the 15 weeks of reading, studying, exchanging perspectives and writing papers with my classmates had done for me. We all learned how to recognize the benefits of alternative assumptions; rely on reason rather than emotion; avoid snap judgments; and recognize your own assumptions, prejudices, biases, or points of view. I found myself evaluating ideas by narrowing my focus, sifting through the ideas generated, and identifying the ones that were the most reasonable—while at the same time residing in such an unreasonable environment. All of the skills I honed in class were taking place outside the classroom, my way of existence had changed. . . Inside-Out was my gateway experience to critical thinking.

"Sibling" Rivalry

Following the second IO Fall 2008 prison class, taught by sociologist Professor Paul Draus, the two instructors, with prison personnel approval,

decided to merge all inside alumni from the second class (as well as a few carefully chosen outside students) with the original TG members. This doubled the size of the group. While prison administrators generously agreed to this initial expansion—a group of more than 30,—for space and “hold” restrictions, they also limited the future size of the group to 30 members. The limit had implications for selection of group members in the future, as will be discussed below. The result at the time was a TG consisting of two non-integrated, discrete groups—first class alumni and alumni from the second class.

Although some students knew each other within the facility, the group experience of bonding in their separate IO classes, coupled with having very different instructors and syllabi, contributed to an initial “group divide.”² To quote George Orwell (1984), we were faced with a situation in which, “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” This bifurcation was experienced and noted most often by members from the second class. Del, a member from Draus’ class, described the situation in this way:

Upon entering, I immediately observed some of my classmates jostling for position, if you will. I think that it more so was an attempt to be recognized as equals. I even observed the “originals” turn their noses up to Dr. Draus in their sly little ways. As classes proceeded, on the surface these two opposing forces appeared to engage in friendly competition, but underneath the smiles serious political positioning was going down. I found myself leaning towards my classmates often times just because I didn’t like the idea of someone thinking that they are more privileged.

Although the IO instructors focused on different content, the concept of “privilege” was central in both. Del’s remarks illustrate how a concept takes on new meaning in the prison context: in this case, reflecting the relative sense of privilege of the “original” TG members within a circumstance of shared confinement. Alternatively, the “same” early group dynamics were also described by Sean, an “original” member, not as an aspect of privilege, but as a “challenge” to integration:

But every new aspect of life produces a new challenge, and this challenge came for me upon the expansion of the Theory Group. I must say that my protective nature kicked in because of the hidden agendas that plague this prison environment. My ultimate concern was that Professor Lempert would not recognize the prison politics that could

compromise the integrity of the program. There was a time when my mind was telling me to stop going to TG because of certain guys who are among us. Never did I verbalize my frustration in the open, but I've communicated it in "silence" many of times!!

Sean's comments reflect his experience of the challenge to unacknowledged privilege as another aspect of the prison environment. He and the original TG members did not choose the expansion, nor did they choose the new members. Paralleling other prison experiences, the new TG members were convened by the instructors' authority. This tested the "safe space" they constructed. As trust is limited in prison environments, trust in the instructors' decision making was limited to "his" professor and it was shaken.

Mark, a member of the second group, also offered his observations on the divide, both real and imagined, and its eventual resolution:

The initial Theory Group, being made up only members of the first Inside-Out class at [this prison], caused some friction as an imaginary divide was set and tested by both sides. Even after all we had read and discussed, we fell into old habits and disgracefully segregated ourselves, into Alumni Class #1, Dr. Lempert's class, and Alumni Class #2, Dr. Draus's class. This easily observed but unspoken rivalry lasted for several months, with each side trying to intellectually outperform the other. Some subtle jabs were intellectually exchanged, some not so subtle. The amazing thing we would see from this almost sibling rivalry, was an intellectual elevation of both sides, to a point where we began to see each other, not as rivals, but as equals set to a common goal.

Mark's narrative is complex. He uses the "imaginary divide" to identify a tension between the shared IO pedagogical goals of TG members and their old "habits" of thinking—those associated not only with prison life, but their lives prior to incarceration. His comments also raise important questions about IO and its effects on students. Even within the context of the facilitated dialogue of IO classes, do students need something more to maintain the changes that they report experiencing in thinking, reflection, and analysis? IO aims for the student's holistic engagement to create personal and communal change where "everyone serves, everyone is served" (Pompa, 2004, p. 27). However, perhaps such transformative engagement requires extended iteration and more "safe" spaces for exploration (Richardson, 1997).

Mark's account also speaks to the unspoken jostling that Del identified. This jostling challenges the prison stereotype of coping with the potential of

physical danger; instead it reflects intellectual posturing to establish position and hierarchy. Individual members were pushing themselves to deeper thinking and critical analysis so as to “score” and “represent” their class well in the open debates on selected readings. In Mark’s account, the competitive process contributed to an increase in the intellectual acumen of TG members, whichever class they completed. The performance bar was understandably high. Martin, a member added from a later class, remarked upon his perceptions of elevated expectation levels of other members and from the professors:

I didn’t know if I would be able to rise to the standards those before me had. To that point I hadn’t heard anything but positive things about the Theory Group and what they represented as a collective body. I didn’t want to be the person that joined this body and did not fulfill the requirements my fellow classmates were fulfilling or that which my professors looked for me to do. I didn’t want to disappoint or let anyone down including myself, but more importantly those that counted on me.

Students will rise to the level of expectation, if the level is reasonable. Through their intellectual rivalries, TG members themselves established very high standards of intellectual engagement. One outside TG member, a university graduate, commented on this process:

It seems really ironic to me that I need to come into a prison for intellectual discussion and engagement.

As the intellectual one-upmanship was unfolding, an external factor contributed to the TG’s gelling and unification—the loss of some members (through parole, violation, death, or transfer), opening space for new members selected by the professors from succeeding IO classes.³ According to Mark,

Another major catalyst in the blurring of the lines we had drawn in the sand was the addition of new members, who right from the start were subconsciously unwilling to take sides.

One of those new members was Jason. He described his entrance into the already established TG this way:

Being in the Theory Group was an opportunity for me to continue to expand, as well as utilize my intellect. I was forewarned about the

contentious atmosphere that was present amongst the group. When I first walked into the TG. . . I mingled with the people I knew in hopes of showing them all that I was about the group and not about choosing sides. However, the classmates that I came in to the TG with did sit together (for comfort) until we learned the landscape. . . From my perspective, the first group felt “Entitled” while the second group seemed to feel like “We are here. Deal with it.” I refused to be caught up in what I viewed as nonsense, to put it mildly.

The addition of new members altered the composition of the TG once again. Perhaps, because they came in groups of three or four and were joining an established group rather than creating a new one, or perhaps, as Kevin suggests, they were perceived to be, or perceived themselves to be, “exceptional,” they were not as sensitive to the tension:

Starting with the third class, the inside students who joined the TG knew that they were picked for the job. They’d been chosen over all their other classmates and could thereby surmise that they were in some way exceptional.

These individuals were invited to join TG because of their work in the IO classes, although this did not necessarily mean they were the most obviously gifted as writers, speakers, or thinkers. Both professors invited individuals not only because of their academic talents, but also due to their perceived intellectual curiosity or openness, genuine interest in personal growth and social engagement, and ability to work in collaboration. Whatever the reasons for their selection, the added members did not have positions to defend and they did not want to participate in the sibling rivalries. It was time for everyone to move on.

Moving on

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the intellectual jostling, a double mission developed within the TG. Early on, TG members indicated wanting to share what they were learning; they were excited and empowered by the ideas that they were discussing and they wanted to share that experience with others. They began, collectively, to agitate for (as yet undefined) outreach initiatives. TG members decided, and prison administration approved the request, to meet twice a month, devoting one session to theoretical discussions and a second to a business planning on activities or events to impact a larger

community. The evolution of TG's two dimensions and their relationship was informed by reading and discussing Paulo Freire's classic, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1997), especially Freire's argument on the unity of reflection and action. The evolution came in stages as TG members began to trust their own intellectual capacities in the face of "sibling" competition and as they found their experiential knowledge theorized and validated in Freire's text. Internally, the group also confronted some of the tensions in Freire's work. In the process, they developed a deeper consciousness of their personal and social realities, as well as their contradictions. To quote Shaull in his introduction to Freire (1997), each chose to embrace himself as a man who ". . . acts upon and transforms his world, and in so doing moves toward ever new possibilities of fuller and richer life individually and collectively (p. 14)."

While the possibility of engaging in truly critical pedagogy inside the prison system has been questioned (Kilgore, 2011), the relatively autonomous space created by IO, which was effectively extended into the TG, provided a unique opportunity to engage in challenging discussions with minimal interference. Out of these discussions, the idea of planning a public event that would blend theory and action emerged. As their initial allegiances waned, the TG members found a shared potent commitment to the power of education as a tool for personal and social transformation. This passion was often attributed to their IO experiences and the TG readings and discussions. As described by Devin,

The dialogical teaching method that was introduced to me changed the way I thought about education and the process of learning. It gave me an appreciation for my own experiences and views as they related to the world at large. During and after the class, I found myself constantly reassessing who I am and what I stand for. Which is a very beautiful thing to be constantly correcting yourself for the better. I feel that many people throughout the world become stagnated or trapped in an outdated way of seeing themselves and the world they live in. This self-imposed thought process prevents them from sharing in innovative revolutionary experiences that may give a better understanding on how to make the world a better place.

These two strands: questioning and improving oneself, and questioning and improving the world, are a theme in students' IO and TG discourse. They form the basis for what Williams and Guerra (2011) identify as "collective efficacy," the link between mutual trust and social cohesion among members of a collectivity, which also encompasses their willingness to intervene for the common good.

The desire to apply their critical thinking, social consciousness and analytical skills, to take the ideas and energies unleashed by the IO class experiences, and apply the TG discussions became the impetus for the TG's first public event—an academic-style conference held inside the prison walls. The idea of the conference was to once again extend the space of IO to more people and to spark more dialogue about the value of higher educational opportunities inside the prison system. We invited representatives from politics and government, the media, academia, grassroots community groups, nonprofit organizations, and the prison system itself to participate. The process of actually putting the conference together and bringing it to successful fruition marked the next stage in the evolution of the TG. As Del noted, *"Then something began to happen."*

The Confined Minds Conference

The TG began planning the conference with their goal of public outreach and the IO Steering Committee's Michigan State program expansion goal. To accomplish both, the focus was on the broader issue of returning higher education to Michigan prisons. The title, "Confined Minds: Incarceration—Education—Transformation," was chosen as it worked well as a "sound bite" that participants would remember. It also emphasized the premise that education in prison leads to personal and community transformation. At the same time, we sought to communicate the wasted value of minds confined in prison, as well as to open minds closed to incarcerated persons and their potential for transformation.

Planning the Confined Minds Conference was a year-long process, culminating in a first-time daylong event inside the Detroit Correctional facility. Each TG decision was made by consensus and every point was discussed ad nauseum. Although the process was sometimes tedious, TG members were committed to consensus rather than majority rule. In the end, everyone learned, everyone contributed, and everyone enjoyed ownership in the collective enterprise.

As we prepared, conference tasks were parceled out voluntarily or by assignment. Outside students took responsibility for contacting potential panelists identified by inside students, inviting (and negotiating with) media representatives to facilitate panels, and for inviting identified "movers and shakers" as conference participants (community leaders, academics, legislators, MDOC personnel, judges, parole board members). Inside students created relevant topic posters, for example, school yard to prison yard pipeline, IO, costs of education versus costs of incarceration, etc. They also assumed public roles as emcees, prepared for participation on panels, and facilitated

small group discussions. The professors managed the overview and worked closely with prison administration to ensure adherence to security procedures. Throughout, we continued our “theory” discussions with focused attention on pedagogy and principles of educational empowerment. Del noted the processes of collective efficacy, specifically the shared trust and support extended to one another in the process of conference planning (Williams & Guerra, 2011):

As the group began to develop the Confined Minds Conference, that energy started to change from divisiveness in to unity and group cooperation. Our focus was on goals and tasks instead of each other.

In developing the conference, TG members had to learn together what a conference is, what it looks like, what the varying levels of activity are, as well as how to be attuned to audience comfort, expectations, and impediments to “the message.” Most of the inside TG members had never been to a conference and so had no idea what a conference could or should be. Creating posters, for example, was a learning experience for the entire group. The professors brought in examples of 3-sided conference posters as visual tools. Members discussed the opportunities and the limits of poster presentations. Then, they decided on the number of posters, the topics, and finally the TG pairs who would create attractive, informative, syntactically correct posters. Inside TG members determined poster information needs while outside members located the information. Poster makers were expected to be topic experts of their topics and, on the day of the conference, explain the arguments displayed on their visuals in detail.

The conference was meticulously planned and arranged so that one’s external or internal status did not confer a privileged position at the table. Every topic panel had an inside TG member to represent incarcerated men and women. Even our keynote speaker, the Director of the Department of Correction shared a panel with an inside TG member. Our afternoon keynoter, a member of the U.S. Congress, lunched at a table with two inside and one outside TG members. Parole board members lunched with inside TG members, legislators, and community members. On one level, our intent was to simply demystify who is in prison and to normalize these interactions. On another level, we wanted to showcase the potential social and community resources that are wasted by having so many “confined minds.”

More than 125 outside participants attended the conference, and evaluations were laudatory. Many attendees focused on interactions with TG members as the strength of the conference, including comments such as:

- *Having it IN a prison with incarcerated men joining ALL parts*
- *Hearing students, both inside and out, speak at each panel*
- *The “inside” presence was wonderful*

An unanticipated outcome of the conference was the renewed respect and confidence the TG members developed for one another. Beyond any individual growth or persona, each TG member experienced the rewards and accolades from their collective actions (Williams & Guerra, 2011). The divisions evaporated. TG members celebrated one another’s successes, and modeled for others the concept of “possibility.”

More: Restorative Justice Workshop

Mitchell, who later completed the IO class and was invited to join the TG, worked as a food server at the conference. He shared these retrospective observations:

Last year at the Confined Minds Conference, I was able to witness from the sidelines the hard work and brilliance of the TG. I was able to see how the responsibility offered through the TG also ignites confidence. I say that in reference to Jason’s presentation [as emcee] at the conference, knowing him for years and how reserved he was prior to the TG and his participation in the conference. . . the success of that conference again showed the relevancy of not just education, but of revolutionized education.

Another very positive outcome was in TG members who “owned” their personal triumphs. Kevin provides a reflective account of this transformation:

[It is]because of my experience in the Inside–Out Theory Group that we were learning skills that few people, let alone incarcerated felons, are allowed to learn. Not because they (other people) can’t, but because the opportunity, even if presented to them, would appear so daunting that they wouldn’t take up the challenge. Being able to say that I now have organizational experience in creating and running and conference or a workshop is something that can and (I will) apply to a wide range of fields. Being comfortable speaking with professionals in my own right, without trepidation, is a monumental feeling for a kid from the streets.

The conference provided incontrovertible evidence that TG members were intellectually sophisticated, informed, articulate advocates for justice. They had developed collective efficacy.

As at the end of their IO classes, TG members wanted “more.” After their success with the Confined Minds conference, the TG assigned a few meetings to stop, reflect, and analyze their individual and collective experiences. The conference had provided a kind of intellectual “high” and a renewed sense of purpose for both “inside” and “outside” members. They were determined to keep the dialogue and forward momentum going, and to build upon the achievements of the conference. Around the same time, the group also entered a new theoretical study phase; they had selected the *Handbook of Restorative Justice: A Global Perspective* (Sullivan & Tifft, 2006) as their central text. The ideas presented in this edited collection inspired intense conversations concerning the possibilities of applying restorative principles in a variety of contexts. In keeping with the TG’s double mission, the question of whether or not Restorative Justice (RJ) could move from theory to practice in the State of Michigan naturally emerged. With a hunger to do “more,” and burgeoning interests in the practical possibilities of RJ, the TG determined their next project would focus on RJ. For reasons of efficiency, they envisioned a workshop that would be smaller in scale than the Confined Minds conference, simply entitled “Restorative Justice: From theory to practice.” It would focus on bringing together practitioners of RJ, those who aspired to learn more about RJ, and those whose activities, as professionals or activists, might benefit from awareness of RJ philosophy as an alternative to retributive justice models.

Manifesting the spirit of IO, RJ, and the teachings of Freire, the workshop was not organized in the traditional academic format of “expert” panels, but rather as a set of overlapping “fishbowl” discussions, where participants would all play the roles of both “teacher” and “learner.”⁴ However, neither professors nor TG members had experience with fishbowl discussions. So, utilizing theoretical models drawn from the literature, members applied the models in TG sessions to practice the technique and to develop a set of questions for use in each fishbowl segment. They were untried, and anxious.

The program for the half day RJ workshop began with an exercise, originally developed by Wray (2002), that presented a hypothetical scenario for participant consideration. The exercise was followed by Breakout Sessions, in which TG members, both “inside” and “outside,” took leading roles in facilitating fishbowl discussions and taking notes on flip charts. The panels concluded with a keynote address by a former assistant prosecutor and city commissioner from Grand Rapids, Michigan, who had successfully implemented RJ practices in the juvenile justice courts of that city. The workshop was brought to a close with a full-circle consideration of the implications of the day’s discussions for the criminal justice system, led in an impromptu

fashion by Congressman Conyers. Lively discussions continued over lunch where TG members and workshop attendees ate side-by-side as they debated next steps. As Elton noted succinctly, at the RJ workshop: “*There were no BIG I’s and little u’s.*” Evaluations of the workshop were overwhelmingly positive. One participant sent this message in an e-mail message:

It was a fantastic event—very well organized, well attended, and excellently implemented. From the poster board presentations, to the group members’ facilitation, our warm welcome, and most of all my individual conversations with the insiders, I thoroughly enjoyed my experience. I broke bread with Darnell, Eric, and Donald for lunch, remember meeting Matt and Steve, and spoke with Rock about the possibility of starting up some kind of mentoring/correspondence exchange with students @ UM. We quizzed them extensively about what they’d learned in their classes & the theory group, inquired about the mission of the theory group, and they brought out their Handbook on RJ for us to glance through.

At the RJ workshop, outside students were more fully involved as participants. At Confined Minds, outside students played more supplementary roles, helping to prepare the material, managing the guest list, greeting the guests, and so on. For the RJ event, both inside and outside students shared facilitation roles in all of the fishbowls. As the note above indicates, they performed exceedingly well, and even surprised themselves with their ability to manage and facilitate heated conversations between legislators, community members, and victims’ rights advocates. The TG was learning to “trust the process” of bringing people together in honest, open dialogue about difficult issues. As Jason noted, “*The RJ Workshop brought about some tense times . . . [but] at the end of the workshop, as jubilant as Professor Draus was, we knew that we were a success, once again.*”

Group Cohesion and the Role of Outside Members

In addition to its impact on the guests, the RJ event further solidified the TG’s sense of collective efficacy in terms of their shared sense of purpose, their ability to achieve strategic goals, and their value as agents of change. According to Williams and Guerra (2011), social networks are a necessary starting point, but collective efficacy (CE) includes an action orientation component of mutual trust and support as a required antecedent for collective

mobilization toward a common good. These comments from TG members reinforce Williams and Guerra's (2011) arguments:

Kevin—Our dynamic often appears to work best when it seems as if we are about to come apart, personally. . . We actively look inward and self-reflect, but the group dynamic and even our griping make us, often more like family than a group of disparate individuals whose only major connection is a class that we've all taken, but not all together.

Monty—The unique features of Inside–Out have allowed me to see my fellow group members as an extended family. And despite my occasional exasperation and impatience, I also see individual development and the myriad of good qualities that everyone possess. . . overall, I have developed a sense of trust and feel confident that I can rely on them.

While it is the inside members who dominate the TG and who were the impetus for its origination and outreach expansion, it is the outside members who—through their commitment, alternative perspectives, and sharp critiques—reaffirm the worth and humanity, as well as the intellectual and justice acumen of the inside members. Inside members recognize these valuable contributions, as observed in their comments:

Martin—We captured lightning in a bottle simply because our outside students care just as much about the success of this program as the inside students do.

Elton—The Inside members value the Outside members more than they know. We understand that these members have families, school, jobs, stress, and expenses. Yet, they continue to contribute to and emotionally invest in the TG. Actually, when we are preparing for group projects, they face even more challenges because we must lean on them for outside resources. . .

Outside members are central to the success and cohesion of the TG, whether in discussions of theory, in poster preparation, in cofacilitation, in heated philosophical debate, or in their unwavering commitment to the group and to social justice agendas.

The one word that TG members use over and over to refer to their enhanced sense of collective efficacy is “magic.” According to Elton, “*Our Magic is a*

blend of our differences, our similarities, and our expectations of greatness from each other.” Of course, as sociologists we would argue that this “magic” is not, in fact, “magical”: it is the product of the deliberate and observable social processes described in this article, especially the dialogic method and consensus decision making that are underscored by theoretical analysis and debate. “Magic” is not a guaranteed outcome of these processes—personalities certainly matter—but engaged, analytical process is fundamental. Once achieved within a group, the magic of collective efficacy is greater than the sum of its parts, and it takes on a life of its own.

Inside and outside members had now twice publicly demonstrated their leadership abilities, their social skills, their professionalism, and their intellectual expertise to resounding success. Once again, they were ready for “more.”

More, More, More: First Ever National Regional Training of IO Instructors

For months Lempert had been involved in discussions with Lori Pompa, IO National Director, about the feasibility of holding a training retreat for new instructors in Michigan. With university budgets tightening, a local training would be cost effective for regional instructors. Targeting faculty in Michigan would help to ensure the expansion of the program in an “Inside–Out friendly state” (as it has been officially declared by both the former and current MDOC Directors). But equally important, the TG was ready for a new challenge.

Lori Pompa met the TG at the Confined Minds Conference and was impressed enough to approve Michigan as the first training site outside of Philadelphia. Jason describes his reaction to Lori’s confidence in the group:

I felt truly appreciated, validated, and humbled. I felt this way because it was an honor to know that we made such an impression on Lori that she felt that we were worthy of helping to expand the I/O training. I think the whole TG felt acknowledged and a sense of accomplishment.

Thereafter, Pompa made two trips to Michigan to “train the trainers.” She led the TG members through the entire new instructor training in two weekends. The first weekend’s practices oriented them to the pedagogy of the training, its roots and ethics, and the important role that the SCI Graterford Think Tank played, and continues to play, in IO’s success. When she left, although everyone was exhausted by the intensity of the training, they still had “homework.” TG members had to design their own courses and activities to present

to one another, and to Lori, when she returned. They were also expected to read and absorb the Instructor's Handbook and the IO Curriculum Guide and to be conversant with the IO pedagogical infrastructure. They were going to be "trainers;" they needed the time and resources to absorb this new identity.

At first, the challenge was both exciting and daunting. Many members expressed concerns about teaching "PROFESSORS." In a carceral environment, even TG members hold on to external definitions of themselves as inmates and they make realistic assessments of their educational gaps. Many TG members' only hands-on pedagogical experience was in their own IO classes. Nonetheless, building on months of theoretical discussion and two successful public events, they set to work designing activities for a fictional course titled RJ. Each group chose a different aspect of RJ as an area of responsibility, for example: Victims as Offenders/Offenders as Victims, Implementation, Feminist Issues and Inappropriate Applications, Empathy, and Restitution. All topics were determined by consensus. Like the training participants, each group was responsible for a list of relevant readings, a 3-hour lesson plan including goals and objectives, and an innovative activity that would "teach" the content. Collectively, we read Palmer's (1998, p. 62) *The Courage to Teach* and absorbed his admonitions to bring one's whole self to the teaching enterprise and "to think the world together."

And so they did. TG members, inside and out, worked creatively and industriously to bring their ideas to fruition. Sean reflected on this new process of collective efficacy (Williams & Guerra, 2011):

As a group we place strong emphasis on the importance and necessity for unity and group cooperation. We come together on projects despite the stress, panic, and pressure.

Critiques of the activities and lesson plans were honest, if sometimes harsh. A valued and valuable component of TG interaction is "keeping it real" (Keith), so both positive and negative aspects of each presentation were noted and discussed. TG members who take to heart the adage "condemn the sin, not the sinner," can apply that same reasoning to evaluating an activity by not personalizing the critique. Critique is a part of the learning process, as it is also embedded in trust as a precursor to positive collective action, and they admonished one another to take the criticism and learn from it.

At the training itself, "trainees" actively engaged TG members in discussions and decision making seeking their advice on activities. The TG members

took their training responsibilities seriously and they delivered. Jason captures the seemingly universal TG response:

We emerged from the training even closer. The way the training went and the positive responses we got back from that was like WOW! . . . In that moment, we realized that it took all of us to play our parts in order to accomplish everything that we have, thus far.

“Thus far,” of course, implied even “more.” The TG remained committed to moving forward, and not, as they like to say, “resting on our laurels.” So, in late 2011, we successfully delivered a *two-day* conference in November 2011 entitled “Restorative Justice: Working Together for a Safer Michigan” that registered over 150 people. It was devoted to moving local, on-the-ground RJ efforts toward real policy change in the State of Michigan. The conference took place on the campus of the University of Michigan–Dearborn on the first day and at Detroit Correctional Facility on the second day.

Once again, evaluations were enthusiastic. One attendee wrote: *“I wish I knew before what I know now. . . I would have been more active in bringing friends and family from my community to share this experience.”* As with their other efforts, the TG began discussions well in advance of the event, and we devoted considerable time to preparation and delivery. As our earlier experiences taught us, magic doesn’t “just happen.” We make it happen. As it moves into maturity, the TG is ready to step forward, in association with other Think Tanks, the National Inside–Out Center, and local and national organizations and individuals who are committed to rethinking the criminal justice system, to advance a more equitable, sustainable social agenda.

Conclusion

While the above account is clearly a success story in the process of extending IO through expanded activity on both sides of the prison walls, we must be careful about generalizing from our experience or overstating our accomplishments. We must note that both the IO program and the TG in Michigan have been inordinately fortunate in our location at Detroit Correctional. The warden and the deputy warden at this facility supported IO and the TG and have made and honored commitments that have allowed them to grow and develop.

From the initiation of the original class, prison administration has put a “hold” status on inside IO students through the entire class. In practice this

means that the population of the class does not change over the course of the term. In addition, once the TG was activated, *all* of the inside TG members were also put on “hold” status for an indefinite period of time. It is the practice of MDOC to enact what Rhodes (2004) calls “the incessant churning of prisoners through an overcrowded system (p.130).” “Hold” status is a significant commitment from the administration and an enormous benefit to TG members who can be assured that they will remain in close proximity to their families. In organizational terms, it stabilizes membership in the group.

Another administrative gift, albeit hard won, was that no correctional officers or prison staff were present in the IO classes or the TG meetings unless specifically invited. Although the warden and other prison officials regularly attend the Completion Ceremonies at the end of the IO course, as well as the conferences and workshops organized by the TG, from an instructional perspective, the classroom needs to be maintained as a “safe space.” Prison is the context within which IO learning takes place, and it has a significant impact on everyone involved and on everything we do (Pompa, 2004). It is the crucible within which the specific dynamics of both IO and the TG are created. In the IO classroom, as in the TG meetings, prison life is—as much as possible—suspended outside the door. We do not use the prison labels “inmate” or “prisoner.” IO students are either “inside students” or “outside students;” TG participants are “members.” A common sentiment, expressed by “inside” students in both IO and the TG, is that, during the relatively brief times of our meetings, they feel as though they are not in prison.

This is a testament to the success of the IO Program in creating a relatively safe, alternative space within an institutional environment that is neither of those things. However, these rhetorical devices do not erase the power dynamics inherent in teaching in a correctional facility. Officers could come in at any time and disrupt the environment by asking, for example, for “prisoner IDs.” From the prison administration perspective, security is always a fundamental concern. Each outside student and the instructors carry personal protection devices (PPDs), clip-on devices with a pull pin for emergencies, and officers are stationed on the floors where classes occur. All outside students and the instructors observe all secure entry and exit procedures: pat downs, shoe checks, metal detector walk-throughs, and so on. Once the classroom door closes, the PPDs and prison uniforms become part of the landscape, as we have important work to do.

We recognize that IO classes also require significant resources from the facility: orientation of outside students, advertising classes, distributing applications, setting up individualized interviews of prospective “inside” students, establishing regular “call outs” or meeting times for IO enrolled students, providing classroom space, and security.

At the prison, the administration's response to TG initiatives was remarkable. Without the support of the administration, neither the IO classes nor the TG would thrive in a prison environment. Both initiatives require the approval of administrators who recognize that "providing services and programs is all part of good correctional practice. It ensures that those inmates returned to society can be reintegrated into society" (Muraskin, 2012, p. 329). We have been fortunate to work with a warden and a deputy warden who are committed to "good correctional practice."

At the same, as noted above, we hold no illusions concerning the nature of the institution. The dictates of the prison system, from either the external political level or the internal "security" procedures, may intervene with our efforts at any time. This was made abundantly clear in May of 2012, when we learned that the Detroit Correctional Facility was going to be closed as a residential prison in the MDOC. Because the residents were to be distributed throughout the state, this clearly threatened not only the TG and the IO program but also numerous other successful initiatives that had been developed there. This was the only Michigan prison located inside the city of Detroit. Many residents of MDOC are originally from Detroit or its suburbs, and, due to its location, it had the highest rate of visits of any facility in the state. For all of these reasons, the decision to close the prison was problematic for us. However, when it became apparent that the decision was beyond our control, we immediately began to lobby to preserve the group and continue our IO programs at another MDOC facility in southeastern Michigan, about 20 miles east of Detroit. The members of the TG wanted to remain together. Thankfully, our persistent requests found a sympathetic ear in Lansing, and the whole group was transferred to the new facility over the summer of 2012, a significant feat in the corrections system. As a result, we were able to resume TG activities in September 2012.

We do not take any of these achievements for granted. Rather, we proceed with a keen sense of responsibility for protecting and preserving the marginally free space we have established within the walls of the institution. The very fact of the institution's size and power should highlight both the importance of IO and its limitations. In and of itself, IO and its Think Tank extensions are only a partial answer to the policies and institutions of mass incarceration, one of many possible "strategies of disruption" (Seidman, 2010). Every IO instructor (and every class member who seriously desires social transformation) must grapple with this paradox. In a sense, we are also creatures of those policies and institutions, and we exist in a mutualistic relationship with them. IO is only possible through a series of pacts with the structures that we seek to interrogate from the "inside out." Likewise, encounters that occur within IO classrooms, in TG meetings, and in the conferences and events we have

organized, derive their power from the concrete fact of social control and exclusion—that we are meeting people and entering into relationships that have been, for all practical purposes, banished from mainstream society. Ultimately, the solutions to the issues and problems that we confront *inside* the prison actually lie *outside* the prison. For this reason, IO and TG must persist in their efforts, however piecemeal, to expand the spaces where light can enter and dialogue may occur

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Notes

1. The name of the facility has been changed for the purposes of this article.
2. Content in Lempert’s IO class focuses on race, class, and gender in the criminal processing system, often including work from feminist and critical race theorists. Draus’s class, entitled “Ghettos and Prisons,” focused on the interlocking processes of privilege, stigma, othering, and segregation, within a range of contexts, from race and class to gender and disability.
3. For reasons of internal security, prison administrators did not want “inmates” choosing other “inmate” participants for the TG. Consequently, all additional inside members were chosen by the professors. New outside members, however, were recommended by the professors, invited to attend a TG meeting where they were interviewed by the collective body, and finally elected to participation.
4. This approach has been used in other RJ conferences, such as the second European Conference on Victim–Offender Mediation and Restorative Justice, held in Oostende, Belgium in 2002. Papers from this conference may be accessed under the title, “Restorative Justice and its relation to the Criminal Justice System,” at http://www.euforumrj.org/readingroom/Conf_Oostende_Report.pdf

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