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Active Learning and College and Prison Partnerships in Liberal Education

PERSPECTIVES

Sharing class time and working on collaborative service-learning projects with convicted offenders inside a maximum-security prison is about as "high impact" as learning can get

FOR SOMEONE WHO HAS NEVER been convicted of a crime, I spend an unusual amount of time in state prisons and youth correctional facilities. I do not work for these criminal justice agencies; instead, I study prison culture, and—in small ways—I have become a part of it. I am a university professor trained in sociology and criminology, and I regularly teach classes inside Oregon's only maximum-security prison as part of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Inside-Out is a national program, started in 1997 by Lori Pompa of Temple University. Inside-Out classes take college students outside of their familiar campus environments and into prisons and jails to share class for a full term with incarcerated students.[1]

As a sociology professor, I find it inspiring but also troubling that the transformative power of education has been most vividly illustrated throughout my career within the walls of a maximum-security prison rather than on a college campus. In the current age of mass incarceration, prisons have become a powerful institution of radical inequality in the United States, and students pursuing a liberal education are well served to understand both the scope and the impact of these institutions. America currently holds more than two million people—or approximately one in one hundred of its adult citizens—behind bars.[2] US prisons have been described as a surrogate ghetto and as contributing to a new era of Jim Crow.[3] For those who have been convicted of a felony and served time in a correctional institution, the stigma of a criminal label can have long-lasting, if not irreparable, effects.

While I am delighted to offer both hope and homework to state prisoners, I regret that we, as a society, did not invest the time, energy, and funding that could have prevented my "inside" students from committing the crimes that led to their incarceration in the first place. After they serve their sentences, they often find that second chances are increasingly hard to come by as their crimes and histories are splashed vividly across social media. With education, however, there is hope and possibility—hope for a better future for those entangled in the criminal justice system, and possibility that the efforts of motivated individuals can improve the larger community.

Learning about social problems and community issues is a fundamental first step in a liberal education that cultivates active learners and engaged citizens, but knowledge by itself is not enough. I use class time and materials to expose students to compelling questions and challenges, but they then have to care enough about the issues to be inspired to dig deeply, to think critically, and to put in the effort to claim their own education. Engagement is key. To cultivate a learning paradigm, it is incredibly helpful to get sociology and criminology students out of the classroom and into the "real world" setting of a correctional facility, where they will come to more vividly know and better understand the problems they are learning about and studying. Similarly, for incarcerated individuals who aspire to further their education and earn college degrees, the chance to share ideas with college students in a classroom environment

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Educated Hope

within the prison can be a priceless experience that makes the goals of higher education seem more attainable.

Such college and prison partnerships are a vivid example of the possibilities of transformative pedagogy and community-based learning. The "inside," or incarcerated, students read the same books and complete the same college-level assignments as the "outside" college students. Together, the inside and outside students engage in deep discussions of the course content, bringing different perspectives to bear on the material and developing new understandings of complex issues. My courses are based in criminology and sociology, but Inside-Out classes can be taught on any topic—literature, film studies, sustainability, education, and public speaking, to give just a few examples of Inside-Out courses that have taken place in Oregon prisons.

While course content is an important component of the Inside-Out experience, the most vital aspect of the program develops when students from opposite sides of prison walls learn to recognize the humanity of the previously unknown "other." Outside students are able to see inside students as full-dimensional people: brothers/sisters, sons/daughters, fathers/mothers, and friends who are paying the price for their worst acts, but who need not be solely defined by those acts. College students who enter the prison environment are able to see beyond the labels, to bear witness and be present, to recognize the pain of others and be cognizant of the humanity residing within systems of mass incarceration. Similarly, in coming to know college students as peers rather than representatives of an elite and judgmental public, inside students are better able to understand their own potential and possibilities. In a sense, all participants recognize they are "outsiders" in some groups and circumstances, and they are given encouragement and space to cultivate empathy for their classmates and their peers. Students from both sides of the razor-wire fence often learn they are capable of more than they had ever imagined.

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The Inside-Out model

The Inside-Out model has been developed carefully, and all potential instructors must go through an intensive sixty-hour training before teaching in the program. Students who wish to participate in an Inside-Out class must understand and agree to abide by the national program's stringent and clearly delineated rules before they can be considered. To engage in the experience, all potential Inside-Out students must sign a contract that specifies the rules they agree to follow. In addition, inside students must have clear conduct—no disciplinary infractions on their prison records—for over a year before they are eligible to participate. Inside and outside students are only ever identified by their first names, and they are not allowed to be in contact with each other outside the confines of the classroom; they may not develop or continue any kind of personal relationship. This is an important but difficult rule, because it means that the kinship and friendships formed between classmates are necessarily and permanently cut off as soon as the class comes to an end. The very fact of these finite relationships, however, provides a real advantage: students make the most of their time together. Their commitment to the class and to each other helps create an honest space where questions are welcomed and controversial perspectives can be shared with impunity.

Inside students may be serving a wide variety of sentences—some are finishing their time and will be released within months of the end of the class, others are serving life without parole and will never return to the community. If the college or university sponsoring the Inside-Out class is willing to waive or greatly reduce tuition for incarcerated students, the inside students may be able to earn college credit for completing the course. When the possibility of scaling tuition to make it affordable on prisoners' wages is not available, inside students may still choose to take the classes and do the assignments simply to be part of the experience. By participating in college classes, they are able to explore new topics and learn valuable information. They find hope in sharing ideas and a small part of their lives with the outside students, who have the ability to be active citizens, voters, and professionals. Many of the outside students aspire to work in criminal justice, social work, or education; their futures will include interacting with the system and working to prevent others from being incarcerated.

Faculty members teaching in prison settings face extra challenges in creating these classes and facilitating these deep learning experiences. While it can be frustrating to deal with the

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double bureaucratic constraints of working within both a college or university and a state, federal, or county correctional facility, those who teach Inside-Out classes generally find it to be worth the extra red tape, time, and effort. Virtually every class session is filled with meaningful interactions, memorable exchanges, and surprising good humor. Working with motivated students is perhaps a professor's best reward; to have thirty motivated students enthusiastically working together in one class is one of the real joys of teaching in the program.

The benefits to inside students of having access to college classes and programs in prison are substantial and are clearly illustrated in the research. Simply put, education is one of the strongest tools we have to reduce recidivism.[4] College courses in prison are not a panacea, but teaching and encouraging inside students to weigh costs and benefits and to look at the larger impact of their actions on their families and communities goes a long way toward producing better educated, more thoughtful, less criminal citizens. At the institutional level, educational programs help promote a more thoughtful and civil culture within prison walls, and prisoners who participate in college classes often embrace new and positive labels as students and active learners.

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For the outside students commuting from campus, Inside-Out classes offer a powerful form of civic engagement and community-based learning. If we take seriously the focus on "high-impact practices" in higher education,[5] sharing class time and working on collaborative


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service-learning projects with convicted offenders inside a maximum-security prison is about as "high impact" as learning can get. The inside students' diligent efforts to complete all assigned reading and carefully dissect the authors' points in order to come to class ready to engage in debate and discussion with their outside peers raises the level of commitment and work for all the students in the course.

Most prisoners have largely learned what they know—and practice—about citizenship and community engagement while in the institution.[6] In Oregon, my inside students participate in and lead prisoner-run clubs, learning to negotiate with each other and with prison administrators. They also hold a deep commitment to "giving back" to the community through working with at-risk youth and donating money from their small prison salaries to charitable causes. By contrast, while traditional college students have often learned principles of civic engagement on campus, few have felt the drive and passion to put those principles into practice. Classes held inside a state prison with a room full of motivated students can spark new interests and ideas for all participants. Students on both sides of the prison walls learn to think critically, to question the status quo, and to examine their own ability to enact change.

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Students in my Inside-Out classes in the prison teach and learn from each other. They learn what it is to know—and to be—the "other" they may have read about and may have feared. They gain perspectives on each other's lives, opportunities, and choices, and they discover both differences and similarities that go far beyond superficial labels. College courses in prisons are a powerful example of the potential and public life of higher education. They allow for and encourage an ongoing exchange of ideas and a kindling of enthusiasm for learning about the subject matter and larger societal problems. In my classes, students develop a sense of collective efficacy by navigating bureaucratic constraints and working together on service-learning projects to try to make small but tangible improvements in their communities.

Along with a meaningful understanding of the academic material, I have an additional goal for each of my prison classes: public education and outreach on issues of crime, communities, prison, and prevention. College students and prisoners working cooperatively—and investing hearts and minds in the endeavor—brings a whole new meaning to the ideas of civil society and community engagement. As their knowledge and enthusiasm increase, students frequently move beyond the classroom to educate their friends and families through ongoing conversations and debates; they discuss political issues and the importance of voting with their peers; they may write editorials or letters to local politicians that are informed by their own experiences and the latest empirical evidence; they put together workshops on campus and in the larger community to share what they have learned as widely as possible; they pass on course readings to friends and family members; and they recruit students to take future classes. The students truly claim their education and make real efforts to share with others what they have witnessed and learned.

Educated hope

Members of the general public may question the value of providing educational opportunities for prisoners who are serving time behind bars as punishment for their crimes. In my experience, Inside-Out classes are an important opportunity to reframe prisons as places of possibility and as unique learning environments for both inside and outside students. Such programs provide critical hope and inspiration for students on both sides of the prison walls. Furthermore, Inside-Out classes are inexpensive to run: they generally

operate at no cost to the correctional facility or the public, as the instructor's salary is paid by his or her college or university. Yet, they have the potential to offer enormous benefits for the individuals involved as well as the larger institutions and community.

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program has grown exponentially since its inception in 1997, and the program is thriving. Currently, more than six hundred Inside-Out instructors have completed the training, including instructors from Canada, Australia, Norway, Denmark, and the United Kingdom. Hundreds of classes have been offered across the United States, and easily more than ten thousand inside and outside students have participated in at least one Inside-Out class.[7] Many colleges and universities are embracing this form of active learning as part of a true liberal education, empowering students to engage with the complex problems of their communities.

While a growing number of college graduates will have taken part in an Inside-Out class or a similar program during their education, not everyone will be able or willing to do so. Bureaucratic constraints of both colleges and prisons will necessarily limit these classroom slots, so we must ensure that other opportunities for deep learning about our correctional facilities, community alternatives, and systems of justice exist. Colleges and universities generally can do a better job of partnering with practitioners and the larger justice community. Together, we can move beyond isolated individual internships to open chambers, courtrooms, police stations, and correctional facilities in order to show students the inner workings of such places and the realities of day-to-day life in careers in criminal and juvenile justice, education, counseling, and social work.

Henry Giroux highlights the importance of educated hope in enabling students to understand and tap into their own potential as citizens and agents of social change. He explains that "hope makes the leap for us between *critical education*, which tells us what must be changed; *political agency*, which gives us the means to make change; and the *concrete struggles* through which change happens. . . . What hope offers is the belief, simply, that different futures are possible."[8] That different—and better—futures are possible at both the individual level and the community level is an important lesson for students on either side of the prison wall. A liberal education should enable students to grapple with the "wicked problems" of our time; hope can sustain them in their struggles to improve life chances for all.

Once students come to care deeply and personally about social problems and issues, they are imbued with educated hope and inspired to continue learning so that they can act with intent and clear purpose to improve conditions in their communities and the larger society. I believe it is our responsibility as college educators to cultivate educated hope and to give students the necessary tools to succeed. It is then our privilege to watch their passion ignite and fuel lifelong civic engagement, community activism, and pursuit of social justice. □

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NOTES

1. For more information about the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, see http://www.insideoutcenter.org.

2. Pew Public Safety Performance Project, *One in 100: Behind Bars in America* 2008 (Washington, DC: Pew Charitable Trust, 2008).

3. See Loic Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh," *Punishment & Society* 3, no. 1 (2001): 95–133; Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

4. See Lois M. Davis, Robert Bozick, Jennifer L. Steele, Jessica Saunders, and Jeremy N. V. Miles, *Evaluating the Effectiveness of Correctional Education: A Meta-Analysis of Programs that Provide Education to Incarcerated Adults* (Washington, DC: RAND Corporation, 2013).

5. See George D. Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008).

6. See Michelle Inderbitzin, Trevor Walraven, and Joshua Cain, "Juvenile Lifers, Learning to Lead," in *Crime and the Punished*, ed. Douglas Hartmann and Christopher Uggen (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 171–85.

7. See http://www.insideoutcenter.org.

8. Henry Giroux, "When Hope Is Subversive," *Tikkun* 19, no. 6 (2004): 38–39.