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Fresh Starts Behind Bars: Teaching with the Inside- Out Prison Exchange Program

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I borrow from Audre Lorde's introduction to her 1979 essay "Man Child: A Black Lesbian Feminist's Response" to introduce this piece. This article is not a theoretical discussion nor a how-to article. This is the way it was and is with me and my Inside-Out students and I leave the theory to another time and person. This is one woman's telling (Lorde, 2007). There is plenty being talked and written about the school-to-prison pipeline, about education's impact on recidivism rates, the debate about Pell Grants for the incarcerated, and related issues. What I hope to contribute is a window in to one teacher's experience, through which, perhaps, other teachers can see new possibilities.

Keywords: Prison Education; Inside-Out; Incarcerated Students

Introduction

I am an instructor with the Inside-Out (I-O) Prison Exchange Program at the University of Oregon. The program started over 20 years ago at Temple University, when Lori Pompa, an instructor in criminal justice, took one class on a visit to a prison. Through collaboration with the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections (DOC) staff and incarcerated leaders at the state's maximum-security facility, and folks on campus, Pompa grew the program from one class in prison, to two, to four, recruiting instructors along the way and growing the program to over 30,000 trained instructors across the US and abroad.

Class membership consists of like numbers of "inside students" and "outside students" who participate on equal footing as classmates. Instructors are committed to bringing students together for "engaged and informed dialogue" that produces "transformative learning

experiences” (The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, n.d.-b). Teachers help students work collaboratively and take risks together. The resulting community bonds create spaces that “ignite enthusiasm for learning, help students find their voice, and challenge students to consider what good citizenship requires” (The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, n.d.-a). This is not just any college course – it is for many students the most profound experience of their college careers.

It may be surprising to some readers that one would find opportunities for fresh starts within prison walls. The prison-industrial complex is not generally known for its uplifting and forgiving qualities. Yet, I have seen it again and again in my Inside-Out students, whether participants are the incarcerated “lifers” or “short-timers,” young, old, or somewhere in between, or traditional undergraduate students hoping to be teachers themselves one day. Going inside for class opens up fresh perspectives to traditional college students as well as to their inside classmates. As the teacher, facilitator, and witness to student learning, I am also renewed in the process. It is not an overstatement to say that we all are transformed by the experience we share in our eleven short weeks together. We all get a “fresh start.”

A Fresh Start within the Prison Walls

In the class, titled *Liberating Education*, we reach all the way back to Plato’s *Allegory of the Cave* (Plato., Lee and Lane, 2007) to examine the nature of knowledge for liberation and the relation of formal education to learning. The course is not a history of the United States’ educational system, but we engage with historical theorists to understand how they considered the dilemmas of their times, which informs our thinking about those same enduring problems: What is the purpose of education? Who is considered “well-educated” and how is that measured? What content should be taught and how should it be delivered? Who gets to decide? Though

many of our outside students are pre-service teachers, the class is open to students from any major, including graduate students. Participants, whether inside or outside, have their own experiences to bring to the discussion, which provides a rich context for us all as we consider what is – and what might be – the future of public education.

Participant Stories

In this essay, I share stories of how this experience changes the way we see ourselves as well as each other. It gives both students and teacher opportunities to think of our identities in new ways and through each-others' eyes. The first vignette is about my own transformative experience while learning how to be an Inside-Out instructor. The other four feature an outside student and three inside students: “A”, whose fashion sense is critical to her identity; “W”, who had previously embraced a sort of “class clown” persona; “D”, the “naturally smart kid” who could do well at the “game of school” with minimal investment; and “M”, who struggled to see himself as anything other than “prisoner” with his ID number threatening to overtake his identity

Guerilla Educators

The training to become an Inside-Out instructor is intense. Twenty-or-so of us spent a week together in eastern Pennsylvania, splitting our time between a Quaker retreat center and a maximum-security state penitentiary. Our guides and instructors were the men of “The Think Tank,” many of whom have been instrumental in the founding of the Inside-Out program. They have worked with Lori Pompa for two decades, developing the training curriculum guiding the national program (Pompa, 2013). These eleven incarcerated men, many of them in the midst of serving decades-to-life sentences and some of them “juvenile lifers,” pushed us to the limits of what we thought we could do as teachers. All of us, university faculty and instructors from different disciplines and different states, were there because of our commitment to social justice

issues, to democratic education and a belief in the decency of our students, inside and out. And still, our guides from The Think Tank asked more of us.

The inside portion of our training happened in the old auditorium of the prison, a throwback to high school auditoriums of the 1960's, with tattered, formerly red velvet curtains hanging on the walls, shabby and worn theater seats in rows, many of them missing their backs or their bottoms. We sat in the now-barren orchestra pit, on metal folding chairs arranged in a circle, and re-arranged many times during the day to accommodate different sizes and permutations of small groups. For our final activity together, small groups designed lesson plans and piloted them, with the rest of the group as our model students. I worked with two other educators, and G was our inside guide, helping us narrow our ideas, encouraging us to take chances and design a highly engaging activity unfamiliar to our traditional college classrooms.

Our lesson was called "Talking Back to Your Education" which allowed participants to each compose a short response to the teachers, schools, and curricula of their past, using the insight they take away from a brief article about the history of the U.S. public schooling system. The end product of this 40-minute "lesson" was a beautiful, moving tribute to the resilience of the human spirit in the midst of an often-oppressive system of schooling. It was like being in a poetry slam circle where every poem was less than 30 seconds. G and the rest of the Think Tank members had constructive criticism for our lesson planning and our delivery, but they generally appreciated it and hoped we would use it in our actual classes. For his last comment, G looked at us admiringly and nodded his head, setting his long salt-and-pepper locks swinging, and smiled wide. "Y'all are a bunch of guerilla educators," he said with admiration. It will always rank at the top of the list of the best compliments I have ever received, and I aspire to live up to it in everything I do.

A Different Kind of First Impression

The prisons where we work have very strict dress codes for visitors, and we are no exception. No one may wear jeans or anything blue (our inside classmates wear blue). The rules for women are additionally specific: we are required to wear undergarments, but may not wear underwire bras. We must wear pants (no dresses or skirts) but may not wear anything tight or form fitting. Collars must not be more than two inches below the collar bone. No scarves or hats are allowed, no logos, and jewelry is highly discouraged. This is sometimes difficult for my female outside students, but for A it was a particular challenge. She told me she did not own any pants other than leggings, and that she did not wear jeans or khakis, only short skirts and tights. Her wardrobe of adorable blouses and tops would not be welcome in prison, and the idea of wearing her sports bra with “real clothes” was deeply offensive.

I invited A to come speak with me privately to talk about what else was going on. We had been in a class together in the past, and I knew her to be a caring, civic-minded young woman who was not so shallow as to pass up an amazing learning opportunity because of the wardrobe guidelines. In our discussion, she talked about the importance of first impressions. As a petite, young-looking, soft-spoken woman, she relied on her clothing to help her make a strong first impression. Whether in a volunteer situation, on a professional interview, or in class, A’s self-presentation was confident and polished. She worried that without her fashion to bolster her image, she would not be taken seriously, especially by folks inside who she imagined to be “tough.” I always explain to my outside students, “This is not a fashion show! Just pick something that will get you through security and wear it week after week. Think of it as your uniform.” Most folks chuckle and are fine, but for A this was no laughing matter. Of course, it would ultimately be her decision, but I knew the course would be a great experience for her, and

the content was important for her as a future public-school teacher, so I encouraged her to figure out a way she could meet the dress code.

On our first day of class inside the prison, A shocked me by appearing in what seemed to be a too-large pair of men's trousers, in a color that called to mind the burnt sienna crayon of my childhood, along with an oversized sweatshirt free of words and logos, as required. She had purchased the pants and shirt at a secondhand store, and cheerfully explained how she used her skills from sewing her ballet shoes as a kid to adjust the waistband of the pants. On her feet were plain sneakers that she had borrowed from a friend, along with a wire-free bra. That hideous outfit was beautiful to my eyes, and I was proud at how A radiated her personality in spite of it. I remember that proud grin as clearly as if A was standing in front of me now, though she graduated three years ago!

Reflecting on her experience with her outside classmates after the course was over, the wardrobe experience was still very much with A. As she sat there in her sandals, short skirt, and flowery blouse, one of her classmates commented, "I didn't even know you had legs!" The room resonated with warm laughter – it was common knowledge how A got her ugly man pants and had to sew them up – but A was serious when she spoke of how the wardrobe requirement turned out to be one of the most important parts of the experience for her. "It meant so much to be accepted by you all, and our inside classmates, as a full member of the class – without having to 'dress up.' Even though it was hard at first to get used to the different clothes, it turned out that I could be myself in them. I could make a first impression with my words, actions and ideas rather than with my outer appearance." She stated her intention to continue wearing what she felt comfortable in on the outside, but with a renewed sense of confidence and self-appreciation than she had before.

A Lot of Learning

W is roughly my same age, as we discovered during class discussions when we made the same popular culture references from our childhoods. In his early 40's at the time, and taking his first college class, W was thrilled, but also, he freely admitted in our pre-class interview, terrified. He had dropped out of school at 16 and received his GED while in prison. His written work revealed that he had not been well-served by the schools he attended prior to his leaving in ninth grade. To mask feelings of inadequacy or nervousness, W had perfected a very entertaining comedic persona. This bright, engaging, inquisitive man was not used to seeing himself as a serious student, or thinking of himself as "smart."

W's youthful, smiling face and twinkling eyes took on a seriousness as we began our discussion of the readings during our second week together. He began tentatively, barely participating but earnestly following along and making notes in his reading packet. His written reflection that first week was short and to the point, mostly telling what he had read and if he agreed or disagreed. My feedback to him was mostly in the form of questions and invitations: "What exactly do you mean by this?" and "Your reader would benefit from an example of this" or "You are on to something here – please say more!" I knew W had a sharp mind—even if his handwriting and punctuation were far from perfect—and he proved it.

After the first couple weeks, his weekly papers got longer; he was engaging deeply with all the assigned readings and making connections from his own life in schools and from current events. He began voraciously reading the newspapers available at the prison, and bringing stacks of clipped articles to me each week to accompany his own writing. In class, W eagerly participated in activities and discussions, bringing that fun sense of humor, and infectious laugh to bear on our proceedings. His classmates appreciated his contributions and demonstrated their

respect by engaging with him in serious-but-fun discussions and debates, for which he was always prepared, due to his outside reading!

It was a joy to watch W come in to his own as a learner. In his final reflection and feedback meeting with me, I praised how much he had changed – as a student – during our time together. “I never thought of myself as a real student before, even as a kid. I can’t believe I can take college classes! They always treated me like I was dumb and couldn’t do it. But it turns out I can learn a lot!”

The First “B”

D was a young, handsome, and confident man – one who had made a big mistake and ended up incarcerated in a maximum-security prison for at least 20 years. He had been a sophomore in college and successful in his very demanding pre-med major when he was arrested. Unlike many of my inside students, D had little-to-zero nervousness about doing college coursework. He had already taken a few Inside-Out courses and done well. He worked hard in class, was always prepared, and his writing was solid. I tend to be a pretty strict grader, but whatever grade I assign an individual piece of student work, it is accompanied by comments, questions, and suggestions. D’s first reflection paper was a stereotypical undergraduate “tell your teacher what you think she wants to hear” essay. It was a B paper – well-written, organized, fine, but showed almost no deep thinking or original opinions about the educational issues we were reading about and discussing.

D approached me during a break that day, very concerned about the grade. It was pretty clear he had ignored my extensive – and I like to think helpful to the point of inspirational – comments and was only focused on the letter at the end. I encouraged him to read the comments, and assured him that I wanted to hear his own well-thought-out opinion, not a regurgitation of

the readings or of what he thought I wanted to hear. After reading my comments, he still seemed dissatisfied, but the change in his work showed me that D had taken my invitation to heart.

Every subsequent piece of work, whether he was participating in an in-class activity with his classmates, writing a reflection paper, or cooperating on a final group project, D went the extra mile. He came to class with his reading packet marked up with questions and comments for the class, he connected what he knew from his own experience to that of his classmates and to the articles we were reading. He even requested outside materials from his family members, such as news clippings, or articles downloaded from the web, printed, and mailed to him inside. He thought he wasn't "artistic" so for the final project he hired a fellow prisoner not in our class to draw what he had in mind (at what cost I do not know, but his inside colleagues found it hilarious that he traded some valuable item from the canteen for this drawing).

Over the course of the remaining weeks of the class I completely forgot about D's grade on that first reflection, but for him it was a driving force and an opportunity for him to think anew about his educational ambitions. In our final reflection meeting he smiled shyly when he admitted, "You gave me my first B in an Inside-Out class. At first, I was kind of annoyed, but then I knew that you really read my paper and that you knew I could do better. Lots of teachers go easy on us because, 'oh they're just inmates' but you told me I could learn more if I worked harder." D continues to work hard; he is a leader of a sports club, and holds down a full-time job. He attends classes in the evening to accrue undergraduate credits with Inside-Out, hopefully to be applied to his degree once he returns to college outside in a few years.

A Chance to Feel Human

Liberating Education was M's first Inside-Out class. He was one of these voracious readers who did not really need much teacher-guidance to learn and think deeply. A tall, clean-cut, light-

skinned black man with a lilt to his speech, M reminded me of a young Obama when I first met him, even though he mentioned no political ambitions or any particular passion for public speaking. In his own quiet way, M was one of the most active participants in the class that term – he was a leader in any small group of which he was a part, though he hesitated to share in our large circle discussions. Everyone in the class came to admire M a great deal, for his intelligence and his way of listening to and including his classmates. He could somehow make everyone feel important and valuable.

It was no surprise to me that the outside students invited M to be the “Inside Speaker” at our closing ceremony during our final week together. He was nervous and asked me to read his script and provide feedback. It was perfect. When M opened his mouth to speak to his classmates on that final night, his voice was quiet but full of emotion. He thanked every one of us around the circle for some specific thing that we brought to the experience, once more letting everyone know how special they were, and how integral we all were to the class experience. Finally, M thanked us for “the greatest gift of all: humanity.” Within the prison walls, he said, it is easy to lose track of yourself as a human being. He told us that he marked Wednesday night as the beginning of his week. When he was allowed to fully be himself and to interact with both inside and outside people face to face and without pretense, that was the reset button for him; it was here he gathered the fuel to make it through a week in prison. With emotion, M said: “A chance to be human in this place that constantly reminds you that you are less than, that you are broken, useless, unimportant ... that is what you all have given back to me.”

Concluding Thoughts

In sharing my experiences behind prison walls, I am not sharing a prescription or a call to action for teachers and teacher educators. None of us ever have identical or even parallel

teaching experiences. My hope in telling these stories is to remind all of us that the magic of teaching can show up in unexpected places. A fresh start is possible for anyone, anywhere. The vast majority of us enter the field of education full of love and optimism, only to have our hopes and dreams sidelined (or altogether crushed) by “teacher-proof” curriculum binders, high-stakes standardized testing, and the myriad other forces of hegemonic power. Our challenge is to keep ourselves open - and to keep the spaces of learning that we inhabit open - to what makes our work important: transformative learning. Any time we invite students of any age and any circumstance into a space with that potential, the magic can happen.

Some of you may end up as Inside-Out instructors and have similar experiences inside, and that is great – but no matter what your work is, I hope that the story of A reminds you that your student’s outer appearance is not all that she brings to the class, and that of W helps you to help that wisecracking student see himself in a different light. When you encounter a student who seems defeated, may you think of M and do not give up reaching out to him. Let the story of D remind you that even “an A student” needs high expectations for his own learning.

Finally, I hope that my story of becoming a “guerilla educator” can help you all keep in mind that it is not only the students who are transformed in our work – as educators, we have the potential to get a “fresh start” as well. Since those special words from G, I have tried to keep myself open to what my students can teach me, to allow them to help me grow. I wish for all of us a willingness to engage deeply in our relationships with students, wherever they may be, in ways that make us all better, more compassionate humans.

Many thanks to my inspirational cohort at Inside-Out Training, Summer 2013, and our amazing teachers at Graterford and Temple. Special appreciation to the folks of the UO Prison Education Committee, and at Oregon's DOC, who make it possible to do this work. But most of all to my students, both inside and out, who make it magical. For more information, visit the program’s website, <http://www.insideoutcenter.org>

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