

12-15-2020

“Building that World”: Movements of Vision in the Carceral Classroom

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Citation Details

Cates, R.M., Hall, B.J., Broughton, J., Reeves, A., Hocutt Ringwelski, F., Zaro, K., Richards, J., Roberts, L. (2020). 'Building that world': Movements of vision in the carceral classroom [Special issue: New student movements]. *Radical Teacher*, 118.

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RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

"Building that World": Movements of Vision in the Carceral Classroom

by Rhiannon M. Cates, Benjamin J. Hall, James Broughton, Andrew
Reeves, Faith Hocutt Ringwelski, Kathryn Zaro, Jenna Richards, Lani
Roberts



"INSIDE OUT PRISON EXCHANGE", INSIDE-OUT CENTER, PHILADELPHIA, PA

In between drinking soda and eating cream puffs, our class yearbook/zine is passed around amidst the sounds of camaraderie and laughter. Later, our circle of writers will reflect on what this course has meant to each of us, our hearts heavy because most of us may never see one another again, yet hopeful because we know that what we have built is not transitory. During this closing ceremony, I can't help but think about fallen leaves in the prison yard, intercepted by the razor wire to finish their decomposition so unnaturally. Much in the same way, this whole process is unnatural: learning inside prison with college students, forming community in a space that discourages it.

– Ben, inside teaching assistant

Introduction

In the passage above, Ben, a writer, student, teacher, volunteer, and activist in the final year of a 22-year prison sentence at the time this article was written, commemorates the bittersweet end of a university writing class held inside of a carceral facility each spring. This final class is both like and unlike the end of any course, one key difference being that this celebration marks the last time this circle of writers, half residents of the facility, half twice-weekly guests, will be together in this particular way. But as Ben powerfully notes, the meaning and outcome of this course transcend any expiration date. Through bitter reality and brilliant sweetness, we look instead to what we have cultivated as a community of activists and writing students, reflecting on what we feel is set into motion by coming together, so unnaturally, to learn as a community in this kind of place.

First developed and taught as a campus-based course, Portland State University professor Vicki Reitenauer has taught the Women's Studies elective entitled "Writing as Activism"¹ at Columbia River Correctional Facility as an Inside-Out² course since 2016. Taught by faculty and instructors trained through the Temple University Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, Inside-Out classes are integrated higher education courses conducted within correctional facilities through institutional partnerships. Typically, courses designed through the Inside-Out model are composed equally of "inside" students that are residents of the facility and "outside" students from the sponsoring college or university. In the case of Writing as Activism, students convene inside the facility twice a week over the course of a ten-week term. The narrators of this article, Ben and Rhiannon, have served as teaching assistants together for multiple years, participating fully in the course and providing support to our collective cohort from their respective positions inside and outside of the facility.

Creative writing instructor and activist-scholar Clint Smith describes prison classrooms as exceptional, catalyzing "place[s] where social and intellectual community might be restored in a way that reestablishes the agency the institution inherently strips away" (p. 97). Our current carceral world underscores the possibilities of the creative, collaborative, and radical teaching its systems and conditions of harm and constraint call for, designating

learning as an inherently "emancipatory endeavor" (p. 97). As writers and co-teachers, we have been profoundly impacted and transformed by this notion of radical potential and by what we have found to be possible in these hours writing, learning, celebrating, mourning, and collaborating within and across the mutually fraught institutions of corrections and higher education. The Problem Statement of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program identifies that both "[h]igher education and corrections are among the most powerful institutions in the world today. Yet, both have limitations in their ability to foster just and humane societies. Individuals in both systems can often feel alienated, objectified, and pessimistic about the possibility of social change" (Inside-Out Problem Statement, n.d.). Further, as it operates in the United States in particular, incarceration functions to socially separate, disempower, and effectively render the human beings that exist within its institutions as invisible and marked by difference. From our experiences, we believe that institutions of higher education and corrections both exist as places where transformative and liberatory learning, change, and growth are possible, even though the control structures and imbalances of power at play within them inhibit collaboration, critical inquiry, and change.

With our instructor, we have developed a productive scholastic partnership centered on our experiences of this course, and in particular on the potential of the carceral classroom to function as a "space-within-space," a site of what we describe as "post-carceral world-building" (Hall, Cates, & Reitenauer, 2019). In other words, the intentional and collaborative space of an Inside-Out (or likewise integrated) learning community serves as a stage upon which a world beyond prisons, as they currently exist, can be envisioned and rehearsed as students engage their experiences of learning together within prison. We have come to contextualize this practice of world-building across and beyond the institutional, figurative, and very literal boundaries of incarceration through education as a movement of student-driven resistance and change-making.

We were inspired to offer our experiences for this particular issue because we believe that there is profound meaning and possibility in bringing students together within carceral spaces and that a significant outcome of this work is who students become when they emerge from the experience, carrying what they have learned with them into their future interactions, scholarship, and understandings of themselves in relationship to education and activism. As both inside and outside students, we have found that our time working together has "[opened] up the possibility for new arguments that are different" from the understandings of incarceration and justice that some of us, outside students in particular, may have entered the course with (Schaefer Hinck and Scheffels, p. 211). This unique kind of community-based learning functions as "one possible way to reorient the public's perceptions of the incarcerated and the need for increased educational programs in our prison system" by equipping students with their own evidence-based arguments that "empower them to engage in advocacy outside the classroom or prison" (Schaefer Hinck and Scheffels, pp. 211-212).

To the same degree, enacting transformative and liberatory change through carceral education is complicated by the fact that the initial and sustained existence of these opportunities depends wholly on partnerships and accompanying agreements with precisely the institutions, bureaucracies, and systems at the center of this interrogation. With that in mind, we believe that at the heart of our shared resistance is a dedication to confront and unravel that persistent dilemma: how do we go about creating change and repairing harm caused by institutions from within those very institutions? And further, how can we resist replicating or acting as extensions of the ideologies and structures we aspire to replace in that process?

We have come to see our collaborative endeavor of learning and writing within and across the figurative and literal boundaries of incarceration as a student movement that is reinforced by the dedication to social justice and the critical interrogation of power and control explicitly woven into this course. In the following sections and excerpts from student reflections, we locate carceral community-based learning and its possibilities as a practice and ideological facet contributing to larger movements of justice, liberation, and prison abolition.

Our resistance is grounded by an understanding of world-building that conceptualizes hope as a strategy of what we describe as the activist imagination in action (Hall, Cates, & Reitenauer, 2019). As visionary thinking, this notion leverages hope as a critically reflective process that empowers us to “collectively reimagine the future and its possibilities.” By also working to evaluate what is missing from the present, this process informs how we conceptualize and work toward bringing desired and (re)imagined futures into being (Jacobs, p. 800; Mathieu, p. 19). This critical framing of hope as a subversive force outlines new cognitive territory to experiment and respond to the world through “dissent, contingency, [and] indeterminacy” as the activist imagination illuminates new possibilities of coexistence, knowledge, and justice (Giroux, p. 63). When these possibilities are enacted, we respond in resistance to the world *as it is*, effectively embodying that future of the world *as it could be*.

In this ongoing practice of cognitive unlearning and revisioning, we work together to grow our understanding of the deeply rooted structures and systems of oppression that support incarceration and are in turn supported by it. With attention to how those systems inform the way each of us have and continue to experience education, we engage in world-building at this scale to dislocate power as it typically operates in the classroom. From the revision of traditional modes of grading to redistribute and foster student agency (Reitenauer, 2017) to a collaboratively cultivated reading list, the structure and curriculum of Writing as Activism are grounded by transformative and liberatory pedagogical practices, in particular those advanced by Paulo Freire (2000), Adrienne Rich (1977), bell hooks (1994, 2003, 2009), and Derrick Jensen (2005). Such pedagogies, as many *Radical Teacher* readers will know, also foster a visionary notion of hope as they work to disrupt and replace oppressive conditions of education by positioning students as agents and authorities of their own learning. This particular course seeks 1) to form an intentional community

of students to examine creative writing and personal narrative as rich, dynamic sources of knowledge, healing, and social change and 2) to identify and resist replicating mechanisms of harm and oppression within and beyond the fraught context of the carceral classroom. Over the ten short weeks of a term, our instructor equips and challenges us to develop, facilitate, and participate in our own writing workshops each week; form and engage in dedicated feedback groups; and create and carry out collaborative activist-writing projects. This year (2019), those projects included a zine to share our work, a letter-writing campaign, a video documenting our course, and an open mic to celebrate and share our words with guests and invited stakeholders from each of the represented educational and correctional institutions as well as our local government.

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It is our intention to locate our experiences and perceptions of world-building as part of an important movement of student resistance—one that dares to envision, practice, and enact change toward a world without prisons. In the following sections, we introduce this movement in the context of the conditions that call for it, locate writing as a vehicle of world-building and change, and reflect on how this movement of hope is embodied as we each move forward—changed and ignited—from this experience. As eight of the eighteen composing our Spring 2019 cohort, we write to our experiences in that full circle, with the voices of our colleagues not represented here kept close in mind and heart as we proceed in sharing this work. The student reflections brought into conversation with one another here are a powerful collective testament to the transformative possibilities of carceral learning as a critical part of movements related to liberation, education, and justice reform.

Throughout this article, we refer to our co-authors and ourselves as “inside” or “outside” students and teaching assistants when relevant and as based on which moniker applied to each of us at the time this article was written. We use the term “integrated” to intentionally refer to spaces of learning and educational programming shared by incarcerated and non-incarcerated students, regardless of Inside-Out affiliation. Finally, we will reference further reading on relevant critical pedagogies and practices of teaching in carceral contexts that inform and build upon this movement. We offer our experiences and perspectives of this kind of educational programming as students and activists passionate about learning as a dynamic vehicle of social change. We encourage interested instructors and activists to look into ways that this type of movement might be possible within their own communities and institutions, as well as to examine the scholarship of the advocates and practitioners that we reference here for more information

about program implementation, best practices, and the larger histories of integrated learning in carceral settings.

“Here Together”

At the heart of our movement is intentional connection and collaboration within prisons in direct response to how they currently exist, imposing difference and distance within and among communities of people. To effectively envision and work to bring a world without prisons into being, we must engage with these institutions, the paradigms and legacies they impose, and the individuals existing within them, within “walls meant to produce silence, not exchanges” (Pompa, p. 264). As demonstrated through the following narratives, the bridging of these walls, the very act of bringing students together within them to connect and engage deeply around the project of learning, can be mutually and profoundly transformative.

By coming together “inside” in this way, students find opportunities to engage that subversive notion of hope as they confront and practice resisting both new and familiar paradigms of power and oppression. Inside-Out founder, director, and educator Lori Pompa (2011) writes of integrated carceral learning:

Of course, the reality is much more complex: At the end of each session, half the class members exit through the prison gate and the other half are locked inside, once again, in cages. This immutable fact is felt each week by inside and outside students alike. Nonetheless, for the period of time that these two groups become one in the classroom, that distinction fades, allowing individuals to interact with one another in a dignified, empowering, and transformative setting. (p. 267)

To the degree that we bear witness to and are constrained by these carceral conditions, we are also called upon to negotiate a new experience of learning and community. This time in this space lends itself as an opportunity to imagine, write, and work towards something new together, to set this movement into action. As Ben explains in the opening of this article, cultivating community within the carceral space—which is designed to be alienating—feels unnatural because it intentionally disrupts the assumed inevitability of prisons by creating something that doesn’t resemble these institutions from right within them.

The following student narratives speak to the power of writing and revising a world without prisons and the catalytic possibilities of coming together:

Prison is not a place designed for learning or building connection, rather, it is built on human abjection. What we have created here together undermines the power of this oppressive system. The fact that we can create a world within a world where it’s not supposed to continue demonstrates that it can be recreated and continued. We are learning together in a transformative way in a space that was created to discourage learning. Bringing people into the prison is vital because it exposes the fallacy in

the need for prisons to exist. – Ben, inside teaching assistant

It’s an inexplicable sensation, stepping foot inside the walls of a prison as a more or less free person. I feel as though I’m trespassing, forcing my way past the threshold of a place that is the reluctant home of hundreds of people. People for whom justice is nothing more than a myth and a deception. People whose freedom has been stripped from them like a ragged and frayed sweater. I’m an uninvited, though invited, guest. I’m to remain a stranger, my name and theirs a secret, held close like a hollow talisman. I’m trespassing the halls of an institution I believe shouldn’t exist, should have been burned to its archaic and cold-blooded foundation ideally a century or three ago. I don’t belong here any more or any less than the unwilling inhabitants of this place. It seems obvious that prisons themselves are the things that don’t belong, rather than the people living inside of them, or out. – Kat, outside student

Writing as Activism is a work of resisting in itself—of the ones in power, the system. Prisons dehumanize us, treat us as monsters, inmates, a number—in fact, we’re actually identified as numbers. In class is the only time that we’re able to feel what some may call normal and alive—like real people. – Queaz, inside student

How can some students and their instructor try and change the institution of prisons? By the university students walking through those prison gates, by the inside students showing up, and by our instructor promoting this class and co-learning with all of us. We have disrupted the system just by taking this class. We walked through those gates and we all shared our hopes. We formed friendships, showed one another that each of us is worthy to be a human being. We also taught one another that our pasts are not who we will always be. Which is the opposite of what the prison system wants us to think of ourselves. – Faith, outside student

The part you hate isn’t when you’re on the inside; it’s when you’re in the middle, the reverberations of hundreds of rattling chain links clanging a perverse doorbell. You open a gate and walk in, but only so far, because there’s an identical gate, and the first must shut before the second will open. For a long moment you wait; it’s like a foretaste of purgatory (which you didn’t used to believe in but maybe there’s something to it), and then someone you can’t see unlocks the second gate with a loud click, and you have to open it really fast or you’re stuck again. Sometimes the stuck part makes your throat contract and your eyes pulse. Did I say you hate that part? You actually kind of love it—the kick of endorphins before being birthed from that razor wired womb into a new self, a temporarily imprisoned self, free to do nothing but talk, write, and be with each other. – Lani, outside student

“With Pen in Hand”

As the foundational practice during our time together in Writing as Activism and in our creative partnership since then, writing grounds and drives our experience of world-building as a movement and mode of activism. We have found writing to be an expansion of that imaginative space of hope, helping us illuminate our senses of ourselves as potential agents of change and allowing us to witness each other doing the same.

Educators engaged in humanities-based teaching in prisons have likewise identified the rich potential of writing as the foundation of a post-carceral world in the ways it provides space for students to grapple with notions of identity, power, trauma and the oppressive systems that structure their lives. Drafting and revising offers new possibilities through “reinterpretations of past histories and hopes for the future” on the page (Larson, p. 111; Smith, p. 96; Berry, p. 44). Smith (2017) emphasizes the meaningful potential of teaching and learning writing in prisons:

Education can and should be a means by which we liberate ourselves from the myth that we are unable to move beyond the social constructs of the world as they currently exist. It should also be a means by which we engage in the emancipatory power of empathy and disabuse ourselves of the notion that the nature of our experiences are singularly our own and unrelated to anyone else's. (p. 85)

The following excerpts demonstrate the range of students’ dynamic experiences and how we emerged as a critically hopeful movement of world-builders through a shared practice of writing:

There is power in the creative written word. Even if the prisoner remains inside or is executed by the state, his writing can still be circulated and spark social change or awareness. As Ira Wells points out: “Where the modern carceral state seeks to conceal its soul-destroying technologies of punishment behind prison walls, the subversive power of prison literature resides precisely in its ability to expose the ways in which the ‘disciplinary’ logic of the prison extends outward and pervades institutional contexts on the ‘outside’” (Wells, p. 481). Creating a space where prisoners and outside folks write together is vital and is a subversive way of nonviolent resistance that keeps one engaged in the struggle. We each come into class as experts of our own experience and authors of our own education, individually and collectively. The power of our written narratives weaves together, sewing a fabric of community that others will add onto in other spaces as each of us move through the world, no longer together but never really apart, in this way, carrying this experience with us. – Ben, inside teaching assistant

I realized one thing immediately: the purpose of our class was not to prepare us to garner support for any certain cause; rather it was to allow us to come to the table and just write. We wrote about personal things, inanimate things, abstract and specific things, anything

at all! I then came to realize that my understanding of activism was perhaps too textbook. Where does activism even start? This class made me recognize that, for me, finding and being able to share my authentic voice is necessary to then go forth and do whatever activism I choose to do. What a gift this class provided in offering a space, the same, shared space, to us, incarcerated and not, to sit and write. To struggle with ourselves and our experiences, to try to recognize and share what’s genuine, and to ultimately advocate for ourselves and whatever else deserves support and attention.

- Jenna, outside student

So much has changed for me. I’ve never thought of myself as an activist, but I’ve always felt that way; for as long as I can remember, I’ve wanted to live in a better world. I would watch Star Trek as a young child and see a multi-international and dual-gendered crew of many races getting along for the common good and betterment of humanity. I look at us here in the 21st century and clearly see that we are not anywhere close to being on track to what this show is predicting will happen. Is it crazy that I want a Star Trek future for humanity? In the 24th and 25th centuries, Earth is a paradise. There’s no war, pollution, God, crime, money, or illness. We’ve moved out into the solar system; there’s enough clean air, space, food, healthcare, and love for all of us on every planet. I want us to do more than just live; I want humanity to thrive and make its mark in history for the whole universe to see. A lot has changed, but not enough for the good. I never thought of writing as activism, but that’s what Gene Roddenberry was doing when he wrote Star Trek. So I’ve been an activist for a long time and never knew it. This was such a wonderful revelation to discover within myself. - Turbo, inside student

When we were together the walls of the prison faded away. This was our class, where we were all free to say and think what we felt. University students, incarcerated students, and an instructor co-learning and co-existing for two hours twice a week. We formed a bond that allowed us to be vulnerable and share our writing with one another. Sometimes we cried, other times we laughed, but we always encouraged each other to keep writing. This was our beautiful reality: writing, honesty, and friendship. This experience has left hope in all of our hearts that one day the system of oppression that is prison will one day crumble. – Faith, outside student

“The World as it Could Be”

The impact of this experience, rooted in writing and imagination, grows in our memories, our revelations, and our grief as we move forward—no longer together but never alone in the ways we carry all parts of this experience with us into our writing, our interactions, and our futures. In the deeply felt and imperceptible ways we have been changed,

and how that change informs our experience of the world as it currently is (and as we have envisioned and known it to be instead), is where we can find what's real and what is possible through this movement, where we can "begin to make the walls that we construct between us—so dramatically and tragically manifest in our prison walls—more and more permeable and, eventually, extinct" (Pompa, p. 271).

As Ben describes in his memory of that last day of class, the impact of coming together as we have in this space signals that this experience is anything but transitory. Significantly, to us it also indicates these outcomes are possible in every prison classroom, every place like this where people manage to come together to think, learn, and change across difference and distance. Smith relates the transcendent profundity of his own experience leading and learning alongside a group of incarcerated writing students: "all these moments, this growing movement, create something that cannot be confined by space or time or walls or bars, [...] something much, much bigger than all of us" (Smith, p. 90). As we venture into new worlds and ways of being, what we have felt as students of this experience and what we have practiced in both thought and action blooms from a prison classroom into a future ever unfolding. We are carried forward by this movement and momentum of hope, trusting its possibility as we continue to witness, echo, and learn from other activists and movements dedicated to a future beyond prisons. In turn, we carry this movement forward in hope, trusting each other with the creation and care of this future world we so deeply desire. These final narratives exemplify how this movement of vision, part of larger momentums and movements driven by communities impacted by incarceration, brings the world we have practiced together, a world beyond prisons, education, and ourselves as we have been, into the future as we will be:

Stepping foot inside of a prison as a more or less free person forces me to acknowledge the very real fact that I'm not "good" in the eyes of the powers that be, I'm simply white and I've never been caught, I'm an example of privilege. More importantly, upon stepping foot inside the walls of a prison as a more or less free person, I'm brought to the realization that I'm profoundly grateful to be here, to have been invited into this space, to become a witness, to meet and to learn from and to grow with people who have had less luck than myself, people who have become victims of the very system that is supposed to protect and serve. People whose stories are screaming and scratching in their bodies to be heard in every corner of this godforsaken land of the free and home of the brave. – Kat, outside student

I never would've thought about going to school because systematically I've been taught that I'm not good nor smart enough to attend college. This class has given me the chance to realize I'm much better, much more than just an inmate, a prisoner. What I've experienced is life changing; I now know that I'm able to

succeed in a classroom. Not only am I able to, but I like and want to be. I've lived a life of crime for as long as I could remember, only because I was brainwashed to think not only me, but people of color and people from low-income communities could never be anything more than crooks, pimps, drug dealers, robbers. After experiencing this class, I've come to realize I'm none of those things—I was only playing the hand I was dealt. I was playing into the hands of the ones in power—but no longer. I now have an understanding that I'm much more than what the system paints me as and I can now teach my daughter to be the best that she can be. There's no limits for her. From me being awakened by this class, I can make sure my daughter never sleeps on who she is, nor what she can be in life! – Queaz, inside student

Seeing the world the way it is, I thought I was alone, hiding in the closet: "I'll come out when the world's better!" Even locked up—still in that closet. I take a couple of Inside-Out classes looking for some intellectual stimulation, and wow, did I find it, and so much more. I found energetic people of like mind and I can't get enough of them. They inspire so much hope for the future in me. I'm happy and proud to be a part of our circle. The most important thing I learned is that I can't hide in the closet anymore, waiting for the world to change. I must add my voice to the collective, with pen in hand. I must write to be the change I want for my world. I will give up my black pen when you pry it from my cold dead fingers. Live long and prosper. – Turbo, inside student

As many of us are activated it forever changes the way we interact in the world—how we vote or how we listen to news about crime and the very way in which we view what crime is and who gets to say. We are building the world as it could be. Together we get to be what we want to see in the world. Clearly we cannot boast in tearing down the prison, however, I am convinced that the way to resist and replace the carceral state has little to do with beginning to tear down, but rather building. Just as it is unnatural for those fallen leaves to continue their death process stuck to a piece of steel razor wire, prison is unnatural, and this is exposed each time we come together to write as a form of activism and resistance, all the while well on our way to replacing an oppressive structure, building that world. – Ben, inside teaching assistant

Ben's closing words underscore both the urgency and opportunity of this work, reminding us of the entrenched and multifaceted nature of incarceration and the Prison Industrial Complex and the critical, multidimensional approaches movements of resistance and abolition require. From our experiences as students and activists, we locate the collaborative and learning-centered practices of (en)vision(ing) and resistance we've examined here as one dimension of a larger and dynamically growing movement dedicated to resisting, replacing, and healing harms inflicted

by incarceration. We present this article as an invitation and call to action for radical teachers of all kinds to consider the ways in which their teaching, learning, and scholarship can contribute to and benefit from visionary practices of world-building such as ours that dare to hope, learn, and build across and beyond the many kinds of walls that work to keep us apart.³

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Notes

¹To receive the syllabus or other materials from this course, contact instructor Vicki Reitenauer at vicr@pdx.edu.

²Temple University's Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program supports faculty members to offer courses inside correctional facilities in which half of the students are incarcerated at the facility and half of the students enter the facility from the sponsoring college/university for integrated class sessions. For more information, see <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>.

³The authors of this article represent the Portland State University Spring 2019 cohort of Writing as Activism at Columbia River Correctional Institution. We dedicate this article to our instructor, inspiration, and accomplice in change-making Vicki Reitenauer, and to writers, activists, and students of all kinds engaging in movements of vision and hope around the world. We are deeply grateful to the staff at Columbia River Correctional Institution and of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Portland State University for their ongoing partnership and support of this course.



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