Social Justice Praxis within the Walls to Bridges Program: Pedagogy of Oppressed Federally Sentenced Women
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INTRODUCTION

Based on my personal experiences with the Walls to Bridges (W2B) program (formerly Inside-Out Canada), I have found a renewed value and meaning in education while incarcerated and I argue that the W2B program is an example of social justice praxis. Furthermore, my involvement with the W2B program has transformed my carceral experience from one that is oppressive to feeling empowered and valued as a person. Additionally, I have been able to maintain an ongoing and meaningful connection with the community through my involvement with the program.

I begin this paper by providing a brief overview of W2B, including my experience with the program. Next, I connect literature concerning three distinct forms of oppression; namely, dehumanization/objectification, disempowerment and self-depreciation, as well as the importance of social intervention to personal experience. Thirdly, I integrate relevant literature with reflections on my own experiences to highlight W2B’s commitment to three key themes: transformational education, social justice, and maintaining a sense of community and connection. Finally, I briefly outline several key barriers to education in prison to illustrate some of the challenges and limitations of the W2B program.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE WALLS TO BRIDGES PROGRAM

The W2B program began in Canada in 2009, stemming from the U.S. based Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. However, there are important and interesting differences between Inside-Out and W2B. As an instructor, trainer and steering committee member, Dr. Simone Davis brought Inside-Out to Canada in 2009. A partnership was developed between Peter Stuart, a correctional educator and guidance counsellor at Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI) and Dr. Shoshana Pollack of the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), who has worked with criminalized women in Canada for over 25 years. Shoshana took the U.S. Inside-Out training during the summer of 2011 and with the support of
Peter Stuart and each of their respective institutions, was able to offer a course at GVI that fall.

Walls to Bridges courses connect campus-enrolled and incarcerated or criminalized students in the community together as classmates, using an egalitarian circle pedagogy that emphasizes respectful dialogue, experiential learning, and shared inquiry. In a “circle of trust” we speak our own truth, while listening receptively to the truth of others, using simple personal testimony without affirming or negating other speakers (Palmer, 2004). The Canadian W2B approach utilizes Frierean principles, Indigenous pedagogy, decolonizing and intersectional analysis, and critical, feminist, anti-racist practices. W2B facilitators and students develop shared learning opportunities that disrupt hierarchies, challenge assumptions, and create deep connections (W2B Training Manual, 2016).

The first Inside-Out course at GVI was offered by WLU with ten “outside” social work students and seven “inside” students. The class met weekly at GVI for one semester to explore issues in a course entitled “Diversity, Marginalization, and Oppression”. The student alumni from this first class became the founding members of the Walls to Bridges Collective (W2BC). This group has met twice monthly at GVI since its inception. In 2014, a Toronto chapter of the W2BC formed to allow people getting out of prison to stay connected to the work of W2B while living in the community. Both groups welcome new alumni and collaborate and support each other to deliver facilitator training, public education workshops and forums, and to implement participatory action research projects (W2B Training Manual, 2016).

I enrolled in my first W2B course in September 2014, taking “Diversity, Marginalization, and Oppression” with Dr. Shoshana Pollack. Upon completing the course, I immediately applied to become a member of the collective. In September 2015, I participated in my second W2B class entitled “Equity in Education” with Dr. Jasmin Zine. As an active member of the collective, I have assisted with the planning, implementation and facilitation of two five-day instructor training sessions during the summers of 2015 and 2016. We also facilitated a Decent Work Forum at GVI in April 2016 in which approximately 120 participants, including about 40 community members, engaged in critical dialogue to discuss solutions concerning employment issues confronted by criminalized women. The background context of W2B provides a general basis for the program’s values, goals and overall pedagogical approach.
In this section, I reflect upon the dehumanizing aspects of oppression to which I am subject inside. Secondly, I consider how interventions stemming from the interests of the oppressors maintain the hierarchical and repressive status quo. Thirdly, I briefly examine the necessity of engaging in a dialogue with the oppressed that respects human rights while recognizing social privilege in order to engage in critical and humane interventions.

In my first W2B course we read a chapter from Paulo Freire’s (2003) Pedagogy of the Oppressed and spent time unpacking the concepts within a small group. Freire’s discussion of oppressive acts as dehumanizing stood out and pushed me to reflect on my personal experiences of incarceration within the Canadian legal system. Although I had read Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed several times in the past, through the W2B, I developed new insights and understood his analysis of oppression from the perspective of the oppressed for the first time. Freire outlines several dehumanizing aspects of oppression that revealed the overwhelming power of Correctional Service Canada (CSC) and demonstrated the degrading aspects of incarceration for me. It was extremely unsettling to identify so clearly with Freire’s description of oppressed people and to reflect on the power of the oppressor.

Freire (2003, pp. 56-57) asserts that “an act is oppressive only when it prevents people from being more fully human”. From my perspective, the entire experience of incarceration prevents people from being more fully human. We are forced through a confusing and unjust system in which verdicts are influenced by money, power, and various lawyers’ interpretations of the law. Everything we know and love is taken from us; we are separated from our families, friends, and communities; we are herded like cattle, numbered and counted like economic products, and locked up like wild animals. Furthermore, Freire (2003, p. 60) explains how “the oppressed, as objects, as things, have no purposes except those their oppressors prescribe for them”. Everything we say and do is recorded by our handlers, and used to classify and place us. We are seen as ‘inmates’ (rather than citizens), known primarily by our Fingerprint Section (FPS) number and do what those in power believe is best for us. We have no voice, no choice and no identity outside that of “criminal”. Correctional officials tell us when to eat, sleep, go outside and take our medicine. They control who we can call, visit with and write to.
Access to proper and timely health, medical, and dental care is challenging and inconsistent. Completion of a high school education is forced, while post-secondary education is difficult to access, and institutional jobs are assigned based on the decision of the security personnel, rather than the supervising staff or the qualifications of the person.

Another dehumanizing consequence of incarceration that illustrates its’ oppressive nature is self-depreciation. According to Freire (2003, p. 63), “self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, derived from their internalization of the oppressors’ opinion”. I have been labelled an ‘addict’, ‘drug dealer’, ‘criminal’, ‘inmate’ and ‘convict’, and a ‘danger to the community’ by guards, parole officers, and others within the criminal justice and correctional system. Many people I know have been called much worse. Eventually, we begin to view ourselves through this lens. CSC discourse claims that corrections can empower women in prison. However, for me, the W2B class is the single most humanizing and empowering aspect of my incarceration, replacing these negative labels and stereotypes with positive ones.

In a recent study on the impacts of the W2B program at Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI), researchers found that one of the key outcomes of taking a W2B course was the interpersonal relationships made between two groups of students who are normally unlikely to meet one another (Pollack, 2016). The relational connections and educational approach of W2B were identified as central to the process of becoming aware of and eliminating stereotypes that could prevent authentic connections between inside and outside students. As I re-read Freire (2003), incorporating my newfound perspectives and insights, I felt angry, frustrated and powerless. As a federal prisoner, I have encountered oppression more significantly than any other time in my life.

Social interventions are necessary for oppressed and marginalized groups who experience social injustice, inequality, and lack access to various needed resources – all characteristics of incarcerated people. However, according to Freire (2003), any form of education or intervention for the oppressed should be developed in partnership with the oppressed group, stemming from their needs and interests. The implementation of a liberating education that starts from the interests and perceptions of those in power is shrouded in the false generosity of paternalism; it maintains and embodies oppression and is an instrument of dehumanization (Freire, 2003). The W2B program is
conducted in full partnership with both inside and outside alumni, including collective members who were previously incarcerated. Everyone involved in the W2B collective, which oversees the educational program, has a voice and is able to contribute to virtually every aspect of the program.

Choules (2007) identifies several long-term negative social consequences for people who are seen as the “objects” of charitable action or intervention, including loss of dignity and powerlessness. In this framing, those with power take up the benevolent and potentially condescending role of protector, while the oppressed group is constituted as in need of protection, yet lacking the capacity to take care of themselves. The objects of charity are expected to respond with gratitude and often become dependent on the charitable actions. Choules (2007) further argues that a charitable approach tends to be patronizing and paternalistic, and rarely remedies the underlying needs of oppressed people.

As I read these arguments from Freire (2003) and Choules (2007), I immediately thought of my experience within the correctional system. As a federally sentenced woman, I am required to take a minimum of three programs that CSC deems necessary for my rehabilitation and successful reintegration into the community. There are certainly some beneficial aspects to these programs, such as encouraging women to examine harmful thoughts and actions that lead to criminal behaviour. That said, my experience within these CSC programs is diametrically opposed to my experiences with the W2B program. Much of the CSC course content focuses on pointing out our individual deficiencies, which are positioned as the reasons why we committed a crime and teaches us how to become “pro-social” people. For example, CSC defines a risk factor as an individual characteristic that leads one to engage in problematic or criminal behaviour. With the intent of encouraging “accountability”, social, economic, familial and environmental factors are disregarded in correctional conceptualizations of risk. Thus, the underlying structural oppressions – which form the basis of our needs – are ignored. We are told that there is never an excuse for committing a crime. If we attempt to explain our actions and the reasons for them, we are told that we are engaging in “techniques of neutralization”, which Sykes and Matza (1957) describe as the discursive methods through which individuals justify their delinquent or illegal actions. CSC program facilitators inform us that we always have a choice, even if that choice means starving, being homeless or dying. We are told these choices are always preferable to committing a
crime. As I reflect on the social justice readings and my experience within CSC programs, I continue to feel angry, frustrated, and powerless. These programs do not explore issues of marginalization, diversity, oppression or inequality – and they were not developed or evaluated with input from their intended beneficiaries.

The current prison system in Canada is like a revolving door for people living in poverty and those who are struggling with addiction or mental health issues; this is particularly the case for individuals from racialized and Indigenous communities. Prisoners receive clothing, food and shelter while all the external social problems are overlooked. Rather than working on eliminating poverty, homelessness, inequality and social disparity in Canada, the federal government spends more money on walls, fences, and guards for our prisons. In fact, according to CSC, critiquing unjust social policies is a specific technique of neutralization that they describe as “blaming the system” (WOMIP Training Manual, 2014). The mandatory correctional programs do not examine structural oppressions, focusing exclusively on encouraging prisoners to embrace personal responsibility for their marginalization. As a result, the criminal justice system maintains the status quo and dissuades the oppressed from critiquing the system so as to prevent the oppressors from losing their power. Those in power are concerned with ensuring “the people continue in a state of submersion, impotent in the face of oppressive reality” (Freire, 2003, p. 52). This is also consistent with Freire’s assertion that the oppressed lack confidence in themselves; believing in the invulnerability and power of the oppressor. By asserting their power, focusing on our individual deficits, and offering paternalistic charity, CSC breeds complacency in federally sentenced women. Women in prison often give up their personal and legal rights and freedoms, simply because many of us do not believe we can win against the system. We are threatened with segregation, losing our jobs, a higher security classification, no parole, no visits home, and other serious consequences; so we are scared to fight back. Despite these barriers, there is hope for change; it is possible to resist and even overcome oppression.

I assert that one way of battling oppression within the Canadian prison system is through strong, collaborative educational programs, such as W2B, that are transformative for the students involved and built on a foundation of social justice. The W2B class format and overall program structure is based on key principles from Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Freire
(2003) explains that this pedagogy requires the involvement of people engaged in the fight for their own liberation, who recognize themselves as oppressed. Conscience-raising or a dialogue with people facing oppression is necessary for change. The oppressed must be subjects in their struggle, not objects. The W2B program allows inside students to have this dialogue in a safe space, free of CSC staff, in solidarity with people who might actually hear us. According to Freire (2003, p. 68), “the only effective instrument is a humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed”. Additionally, respecting human rights can potentially lead to radical social change. Choules (2007) argues that social injustice could be eliminated if human rights were completely embraced. However, she also cautions us to recognize the impact of social privilege. Those who occupy positions of power must be challenged for their role in perpetuating social injustice by maintaining their power and privilege. This is the value of a W2B classroom; it actively seeks to level the playing field by using circle pedagogy to reduce traditional academic, social and economic hierarchies. Considering conscience-raising as social intervention helped to mitigate my feelings of anger and powerlessness, and filled me with hope to change our archaic and oppressive prison system.

**COLLABORATIVE LEARNING: TRANSFORMATION, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS**

I believe that my participation in the W2B program is an exercise in social justice praxis. The program is committed to transformative education, social justice and maintaining a sense of community. In what follows, I use liberatory, critical, and transformative pedagogical literature to reflect on my experiences within the W2B classroom and collective to illustrate this point. Furthermore, I demonstrate how W2B’s pedagogical approach and experiential learning activities are directly linked to meeting and maintaining certain human rights.

**Transformative Qualities of W2B**

Education alone can be transformative and liberating for people in prison, where loneliness and degradation are common in an atmosphere permeated
by contention and distrust (Perry, 2013). Gaining an education provides prisoners with a sense of hope, purpose, and strength while giving them the knowledge and skills to succeed in the community. This in turn enables opportunities for further education and career aspirations once released. The pedagogical model that both W2B and the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program pursue goes one step further in transforming traditional Western approaches to education, thus having the potential to transform the prison, university and overall community. W2B and Inside-Out pedagogies both do away with the one-way transmission of information that typically characterizes learning environments and, as a result, eliminate hierarchy where students also become teachers. This model requires all students to be active participants, rather than passive recipients of information. By being active in one’s education, the student is more likely to become invested (Turenne, 2013). These pedagogical practices analyze and reject structures of oppression, injustice, and inequality while empowering the voices of those who are commonly silenced and marginalized (Perry, 2013). This innovative course format allows students to traverse boundaries between the university and prison, boundaries that have been created and enforced by a culture of law and order. Crossing boundaries is the engine of transformation (Bumiller, 2013).

Based on interviews with students who took a one-semester W2B course, Pollack (2016) found transformative impacts on the students’ sense of self as a result of their participation in the program. Students spoke about the positive impacts on their self-esteem, sense of belonging, family relationships, personal agency, attitudes and behaviour. From my own experience with the program, I felt an increase in my self-esteem: I felt like I belonged, was valued and was heard for the first time since my incarceration. For me, involvement in the classroom offers a break from typical prison life. When participating in the class and collective, I feel like an intelligent, valuable and thoughtful individual who is able to express herself freely, without fear of repercussion. I am appreciated for my opinion, my voice is heard and I am a valued subject in the class. Freely choosing to participate in the program, I have an identity outside of the labels prescribed to me by CSC.

According to Allred and colleagues (2013), feelings of transformation and confidence contribute to one’s capacity to handle life’s opportunities and challenges. In a W2B course, transformation stems from the relational learning experience, which shifts the focus from the potential for individual
change to a collaborative understanding of more complex social issues that are constructed through respectful and sustained engagements with the professor and fellow classmates (Allred et al., 2013).

The W2B program includes people from diverse cultural, racial and social backgrounds with very different life experiences. By learning to transcend these differences we learn that people are fundamentally alike. Dynamics regarding race, gender, class, age, sexuality, and other differences within the classroom are not ignored, but are instead worked through in a collective and authentic manner (Turenne, 2013). Honouring one another’s identities requires trust and openness as students bring their personal truths into the circle conversation. Students identify circle pedagogy and learning from each other’s diverse life experiences as leading to personal growth that extends beyond the classroom context (Pollack, 2016). This pedagogical model provides concrete evidence that through individual and collective effort we can transform society into a safer and more egalitarian place to live (Perry, 2013).

The classroom is structured with all of the “inside” and “outside” students, the teaching assistant and professor sitting in a circle formation, so that no one person is perceived as having more power or knowledge than another. This circle format also allows for every person in the room to have an opportunity to speak from their own experience and truth. No single perspective is seen as more accurate or valuable than another (Palmer, 2004). The circle allows everyone to have a voice and gives the space and time for each person to share their story or perspective. This is especially important for marginalized people who may rarely have had the opportunity to be heard. Pollack (2016) explains how the concept of “finding a voice” was a repetitive theme throughout the interviews she conducted with W2B students. Interview participants noted that the ability to be oneself in the classroom and to discuss one’s lived experiences with their peers using the analytical framework of the course was transformative.

This exercise of sharing our stories and being heard is directly linked to Freire’s (2003) calls for consciousness-raising and generating a dialogue with the oppressed. The circle format is both effective and humanizing, which Freire states are essential aspects for progressive social change. Similarly, Choules (2007) claims that respecting and embracing human rights can potentially lead to radical social transformation. The circle format does not allow for debating any students’ perspective truth or censoring
one’s opinion. Instead, we are encouraged to voice our thoughts and beliefs, while listening receptively and respectfully to one another. Therefore, one of our fundamental freedoms guaranteed in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (CCRF, 1982) is being exercised: our “freedom of thought, belief opinion and expression” (article 2B). Similarly, in Choules’ (2007) critique of charity, she argues that those in power are the furthest from the reality of those with need. The circle format allows oppressed federally sentenced women to share and express their material experiences with each other. This simple activity within the class is our only opportunity to speak openly and freely about our beliefs and experiences while incarcerated.

**Commitment to Social Justice and Human Rights**

In one W2B course, we read articles related to social justice and the class participated in an activity where four pieces of chart paper were posted around the room. We were invited to envision a utopian society that is built on social justice principles within four areas: education, employment, social and mental health services, and the criminal justice system. We had an opportunity to move freely around the room writing our uncensored ideas under the relevant headings on the chart paper. Afterwards, these documents were shared and discussed as a class. I have participated in similar visioning activities before, but I found this particular exercise to be especially empowering. I felt engaged, excited, and invigorated with hope because despite being oppressed within the prison system, my voice was being respected and heard.

Based on my description of the chart exercise, it is clear that this activity aligns with the CCRF (1982). The United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 26 also outlines the right to education and is especially relevant to my learning experiences facilitated via the circle format and the chart exercise. According to the UN Human Rights treaty, education should be “directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups ... for the maintenance of peace”. Sharing our stories and truly listening to one another without judgement, while working together as a class to envision a socially just society are both examples of an education based on key human rights principles.

A central aspect of Freire’s (2003) Pedagogy of the Oppressed concerns the oppressed person’s consciousness, specifically their view of the world and
their ethics. Beginning a dialogue with the oppressed person or group can help to challenge the oppressed consciousness in order to engage them in the fight for liberation. According to bell hooks (1994), engaging in dialogue is one of the easiest ways we can begin as teachers, students and critical thinkers to cross boundaries. W2B courses offer unique opportunities for dialogue and leadership development among diverse students. Such opportunities facilitate a paradigm shift in thinking about crime and social justice, potentially leading to social change (Bumiller, 2013). Respectful dialogue leads to understanding others; W2B courses facilitate this through small group work and projects, which transforms into action as students learn to work across differences, to agree and disagree without resentment, and to collaborate more effectively. These skills can ripple out to the larger community, potentially reducing stereotypes and discrimination. Ideally, this can alter society’s perceptions of, and response to, various inequalities and harmful ideological practices (Turenne, 2013).

Social justice is promoted within the W2B classroom as power relations are overcome when made transparent (Carines, 2013). Outside students can glimpse into the lived realities of the inside students, while inside students interact with academic material in unique and interesting ways, and have discussions on social justice issues with engaged community members. Outside students often experience a radical change in the way they view incarcerated individuals as they learn to challenge dominant stereotypes about criminalized people (Perry, 2013). W2B course content and the process of creating a community cultivate a sense of personal accountability and commitment from both inside and outside students to challenge social inequalities (Pollack, 2016).

The W2B collective of alumni from the program is an example of how community-based learning can evolve into a deeper, long-term commitment to collaborate on social justice issues. There are currently eight Inside-Out “think-tanks” in the United States and two W2B circles or collectives in Canada (Pompa, 2013). Outside student alumni often join the collective so they can maintain their connection to W2B. Collective projects related to social justice can help to intensify civic engagement and promote interest in these issues amongst the general public through workshops and events. The Inside-Out think-tanks and W2B collectives encourage the pursuit of higher education among inside students, while facilitating the development of personal agency and social activism, and empowering members to create change. Many members and program alumni have taken leadership roles in
diverse social justice initiatives (Perry, 2013). As an inside student, I have experienced a renewed sense of hope in my ability to complete my graduate studies and contribute to social action. I plan on using this oppressive experience to advocate for prisoners’ rights in the future.

Maintaining a Sense of Community and Connection
As students transform their relationships with and work together in the pursuit of social justice, a sense of community develops. Pollack (2016) reported that students often used the word “community” to refer to a sense of accountability, interconnectedness and shared purpose that they believed developed through class interactions. Utilizing circle pedagogy builds a sense of community (Palmer, 2004), while small group work and projects also assists in fostering community. As students work together towards a common goal they must compromise, and be patient and empathetic (Turenne, 2013). In contrast to the feelings of alienation and loneliness that prisoners often experience, W2B students recognize each other as fully human and develop skills to connect with others, which can help to combat emotional isolation. In effect, the program structure aims to build relationships and a greater sense of humanity amongst students (Harris, 2013).

BARRIERS TO SECURING AN EDUCATION WHILE IN PRISON

While there are many benefits that flow from the W2B program structure, it is also important to contextualize the barriers and challenges that make it difficult and impossible for some to secure an education while incarcerated. The barriers to education that exist in prison are physical, institutional, relational and psychological in nature. The following is meant to provide a brief snapshot of some of the main challenges faced by women accessing education programs in prison.

Physical Barriers

*Limited Access to Computers*
Incarcerated students do not have access to computers in their living unit. Students can access classroom computers only during those hours when movement throughout the institution is permitted and when the classrooms
are not in use. During evenings and weekends, she must rely on the guards to open the room. There is no Internet access, which restricts our ability to conduct research, obtain articles and books, or complete college or university correspondence courses, since most are only available online.

**Lockdowns**
Management will lockdown the institution for various “security” reasons, forcing people in custody to remain in their living units, cancelling all programs and not allowing outside visitors into the prison. These lockdowns can last anywhere from a matter of hours to days or even weeks. A lockdown can result in missed classes and W2B collective meetings, which we are often unable to make-up. During lockdowns, incarcerated students cannot access computers and cannot speak to other inside students or teaching assistants.

**Institutional Barriers**

**Lack of Resources**
The computers that are available to incarcerated students have outdated hardware and software. The prison library is relatively small with very limited hours and minimal academic materials. The focus of CSC’s education policies is with the completion of high school, therefore post-secondary education is given second priority.

**Financial**
Fortunately, W2B courses and the required course materials are offered free of charge to inside students. It is extremely difficult to pursue additional post-secondary programs since people in custody have virtually no income and cannot access a scholarship that is available to students in the community, not to mention the fact that there are a very limited number of bursaries available.

**Relational Barriers**

**Interpersonal Conflict**
Due to the location and nature of the W2B course, conflict can enter the classroom more easily than in a traditional setting, preventing or damaging
group cohesiveness, if not mediated by the facilitator. Unlike taking classes on a college campus, in prison we are locked in a very small, restricted, oppressive community in which solidarity is punished and frowned upon.

Power Imbalances
Although differences in power are present everywhere in society, and clearly within the university setting, yet they are especially salient in the prison context. As prisoners, we are constantly oppressed and discriminated against. Our voice, choices and actions are consistently monitored, judged, and restricted. It is extremely challenging to succeed in this environment. Many women find it difficult to participate in class and express their views on paper because prison is not a safe environment in which to speak out.

Psychological Impacts

High Stress Environment
It is not easy to focus on academic work in the oppressive, stressful environment of a prison. Along with being separated from our friends and family, communities, and nature, we experience constant instability. The policies and procedures of the prison are enforced inconsistently depending on the guards’ mood, who is working, or which prisoner is being targeted. There are frequent house and room searches in which items can be seized, misplaced, or destroyed. We also lack privacy and often do not have a quiet place to work.

These barriers, along with the oppressive environment, cause many prisoners to feel powerless, unmotivated, and hopeless at times. Simply reading course materials or completing a written assignment requires an inside student to surmount obstacles that outside students may not imagine exist. Additionally, we face some of the same barriers that outside students’ experience, such as personal/family issues, health problems, or mental health issues, yet we do not have the same access to social and practical supports.

CONCLUSION

Education can facilitate the process of empowerment for many individuals. For marginalized people within an oppressive institution, education has the
potential to change lives. Specifically, the W2B program is an example of social justice praxis because it has the ability to facilitate transformation at the individual, relational and community levels for people experiencing oppression. The program’s circle pedagogical approach alters traditional Western models of education by disrupting hierarchies, utilizing experiential learning approaches, integrating one’s whole self into the learning experience and encouraging marginalized people to have a voice. Furthermore, the W2B program fosters a commitment to social justice and builds a sense of community among participants, while creating and maintaining community connections for incarcerated students. Although there are many barriers to education in prison, based on my personal experience, I argue that the W2B pedagogy and the meaningful relationships it facilitates are an effective way to overcome these barriers, transform people’s lives, and empower women. These positive impacts can ripple out from the classroom, to the prison and, finally, the wider community.

REFERENCES


**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Rachel Fayter* is a 35-year-old single woman currently incarcerated at Grand Valley Institution in Kitchener, Ontario. She has been actively involved in the Walls to Bridges program as a student and collective member since September 2014. Rachel was born in Toronto and moved around often with her parents as a child. She attended Wilfrid Laurier University for over ten years, earning her BA in Psychology in 2004 and her MA in Community Psychology in 2006. She completed most of her coursework for a PhD in Community Psychology prior to her incarceration. Rachel has done extensive work in both community and research settings with troubled children and youth, and homeless adults grappling with mental health issues. Following her release, she hopes to complete her PhD in the same or a related field, as well as continue her work with social activism and community engagement, focusing on advocating for prisoner rights.
Report on the IMPACT ON STUDENTS

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THE WALLS TO BRIDGES PROGRAM (FORMERLY INSIDE-OUT CANADA):

A Partnership between the Lyle S. Hallman Faculty of Social Work (FSW) and Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI), Kitchener, ON

The first Walls to Bridges course was offered through the Faculty of Social Work (FSW) at Wilfrid Laurier University at Grand Valley Institution (GVI) in Fall 2011 as a pilot. In 2012, the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation began funding our program, allowing us to continue providing courses, to expand our course offerings across the university and other locations across Canada, to become the Canadian Instructor Training site for Walls to Bridges, and develop and locate the National Walls to Bridges office in the FSW at Wilfrid Laurier University.

As of January 2015, 76 Masters of Social Work students from Wilfrid Laurier and 61 students from GVI had completed W2B classes. There were seven full-time professors (four in the Faculty of Social Work and two in the Faculty of Arts) and two Ph.D. candidates in Social Work trained in the W2B educational model. Once an instructor is trained in the pedagogy they can offer a course through their faculty or department. Students from both the university and the correctional facility apply for the course with a letter of interest. The instructor will then interview each qualified applicant and select approximately 20-22 students; with equal numbers of students from the correctional facility and from the university.

The courses offered through the FSW at the time of the study were: Diversity, Marginalization and Oppression (3 times); Families and Systems; Human Rights; and Gender, Race and Crime. This study focuses upon the impact on students who have taken Walls to Bridges courses through the FSW/GVI program.
Students were interviewed about many aspects of their W2B experience. This report focuses on what they said about the impact of participating in the W2B program. For the purposes of this study, impact was conceptualized as the short and long term effects – relational, intellectual, emotional, attitudinal, institutional, and social – of participating in this program.

**THE INTERVIEWERS: W2B ALUMNI**

An immediate and significant outcome of the first W2B course at GVI in Fall 2011 was the establishment of the Walls to Bridges Collective (W2BC). Students from this first class decided to form the collective, whose vision and mission was to bring Walls to Bridges classes to greater numbers of people across Canada and to advocate for improved educational access for criminalized people. Meeting biweekly since January 2012 at GVI, this group provides a five-day annual training for university/college instructors and they collaborated on this research.

After receiving ethics approval from both WLU and the Correctional Service Canada, W2BC members (both incarcerated and non-incarcerated W2B alumni) received training in interview techniques, developed an interview guide, and began carrying out interviews with alumni in July 2013. Thirty-seven of the sixty-four students who had taken W2B courses were interviewed (16 incarcerated, 21 non-incarcerated). It took four months to receive ethics approval from the Correctional Service Canada, so unfortunately many of the inside students were released during the time we were awaiting approval and we did not have contact information for them.

I supervised the W2BC interviewers but did not conduct any of the interviews myself due to the potential conflict of interest presented by being both an instructor in the program and involved in the development of the Canadian program. Three outside alumni--two (formerly) inside alumni and one doctoral level research assistant-- conducted the interviews with W2B students in the community. Additionally, members of the W2BC (14 participants) engaged in ‘dyad interviews’ in which they interviewed each other about their experiences and the impact of participating in a W2B course.
THE INTERVIEW GUIDE

W2BC and I worked together on developing an interview guide that would capture the myriad aspects of the W2B experience. Participants were recruited via email if they were living in the community and via the prison mail system at GVI. The interview guide, while semi-structured to allow freedom for respondents to speak of what was most important to them, was organized around three central areas:

1. The impact of the process (circle format, dialogue and critical reflection on scholarly texts and experience) and context (classroom in a prison setting) on student learning;

2. Student learning about power, diversity and privilege;

3. The impact on students’ conceptualization of and engagement with communities (prison and/or outside community).

Please see the INTERVIEW GUIDE. A professional transcriber was hired to transcribe the interviews.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data analysis methods were consistent with how W2BC has come to operate and with our goals of providing meaningful leadership and skill development within our collective at GVI. After transcripts were professionally transcribed, several of the collective members who had conducted the interviews analysed the transcripts and developed themes or categories of ideas that were emerging. We then engaged in a process of ‘textual conversation,’ whereby I also analyzed and identified themes in the same interviews, while also commenting on what the interviewer had identified as themes. We did this process for about 1/3 of the transcripts, co-analyzing the transcripts together in this way.

The second phase of data analysis involved two more collaborative processes. First, I identified broad themes that ran throughout all the interviews (e.g. Personal Impact on Students, Challenging Assumptions/Stereotypes, Social Justice, Community Building, Facilitation) and brought quotes from the interview transcripts associated with these themes to a W2BC meeting at GVI. The collective broke into small groups and discussed the quotes and themes, analysing together the meaning of the participants’ words and developing and refining the themes and categories.1

### INTERVIEW SAMPLE
**Participant Demographics N= 37**

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Outside Students</td>
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<td>Asian</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of education – Outside – In 2 yr MSW program</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Level of Education – Inside – High school</td>
<td>2 (N=16)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Highest Level of Education – Inside – some undergrad or college courses</td>
<td>9 (N=16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level of Education – Inside – completed BA or College Diploma</td>
<td>3 (N= 16)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Highest Level of Education – Inside – unknown</td>
<td>2 (N=16)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants in this study identified three broad themes related to the impact that W2B classes had on their learning and their lives. These are: i) dispelling stereotypes about the ‘Other’; ii) commitment to social action; and iii) the transformative effects of holistic learning.

1. “IT TAKES AWAY THE LABELS: SOME PEOPLE ARE MORE LIKE YOU THAN YOU KNOW”: CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES ABOUT ‘THE OTHER’

Inside and Outside students had different expectations and motivations for taking a Walls to Bridges course, particularly related to each group’s specific concerns about how they would be regarded by their co-students. For inside students, the opportunity to take a university course was particularly attractive as there is very little access to post-secondary classes in Canadian jails and prisons. A significant barrier to accessing university classes is that prisoners are not permitted access to the internet and most university correspondence courses are online. Although at GVI there is access to correspondence courses through two Ontario universities that still allow ‘paper and pen’ versus electronic communication, subsidies are hard to come by and most students do not have access to resources to pay for these courses. All inside participants in this study said they applied for the Walls to Bridges course to continue their education – they were motivated by the fact that WLU provides a bursary for them to take the course, the idea of classes being ‘in person’ rather than correspondence, and by the idea of studying with ‘real’ university students from the community. Some students had college/university experience prior to incarceration and many did not. All Master of Social Work students said they were attracted to the experiential learning model of the classes and to the fact that they were going to learn about social justice issues and anti-oppressive theory and practice outside of the classroom and with people they assumed had lived experiences of marginalization and oppression.

Although inside and outside students came to the class with different types of motivations and goals, they did share a common concern that they would be judged or misunderstood.
They assumed that there would be differences that would divide the class in terms of those who are incarcerated and those who were not. Both groups expressed some concern that they would be judged by the other group – either for being ‘a criminal’ or for being ‘privileged’ and ‘naïve’. One outside student, for example, stated her concerns in the following way:

“I remember, I guess maybe being self-conscious or a little bit insecure. Like, what are they going to think of me, are they going to judge me? I guess the idea of privilege came to mind. You know … I’m coming into this place every week, and I get to leave every week. What are they going to think of me because of that? Are they going to be like screw you, kind of thing, you get to leave?” - COOPER

Inside students expressed particular concern that students from outside would think they were unintelligent and/or dangerous and that they would be regarded as ‘Other’. The following comments are illustrative of some of the initial concerns expressed by inside participants in this study.

“[I thought] they would all look down upon us or down upon me, and be like, oh she’s an inmate, or she’s not smart because she ended up in jail.” - FRANCES

“ … laugh at me if I speak the way I speak, or they’re going to make fun of me … ” - SUE

“ … most of us in the class figured that with the students coming in, the students would probably be like, white, middle-class students, coming in and looking down on us and judging us.” - CHELSEA

One of the main concerns raised by inside students is that the outside students would be studying and observing them as ‘criminals’, rather than relating to them as co-learners who are in prison. For example:

“ … are they going to be here really to learn about the class, or are they just going to sit there and question our crimes and why we’re in here?” - CHELSEA

“ … I felt that as an Inside student, I would be really observed. I felt that, even though the Outside students would have good intentions, they were kind of coming to watch us through a fish bowl and observe us.” - HANNAH

Jessica also employed the ‘fish bowl’ metaphor, stating:

“ I worried that I would feel uncomfortable being looked at, like in a fish bowl kind of thing … ”

Interestingly, many participants said that their fears and stereotypes dissipated during the very first class, sometimes even before class began. An outside student, Shorty, illustrates an awareness of unconscious assumptions brought to the surface within a few minutes of being in the classroom together.

2. All names are pseudonyms chosen by the study participants
“But when I actually walked into that first class and everyone flooded into the classroom, my first thought was that they were teachers – that they were teachers in the prison. So that goes to show what my judgments actually were.” - SHORTY

The first class of each W2B class is structured to begin to build connections and allow students to experience each other in a relatively lighthearted way. Through experiential activities, such as the Wagon Wheel icebreaker, a popular icebreaker used by group facilitators for team-building (e.g., The International Association of Facilitators http://www.iaf-world.org/index.aspx), students meet each other in a fun and non-threatening way. All participants identified this class and the icebreaking activities as pivotal to breaking down barriers and dismantling stereotypes.

The classroom format and teaching method in W2B classes is very different from conventional university teaching. Based upon key principles of Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, classes draw upon notions of wholeness, embracing lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge, particularly in regard to experiencing oppressive social structures. Further, the classroom dynamic is one in which all participants – students and instructors – are considered to be both teachers and learners, thus reducing traditional educational hierarchies about who is a legitimate ‘knower’. The hierarchy is further mediated by a classroom format that includes ‘circle pedagogy’, a method of sharing perspectives and ideas that draws from Parker Palmer’s Circle of Trust and from indigenous learning circles. Integral to circle work is a process that allows each student to respond to the question/topic without interruption. Each student is given the time and space to share what s/he wants about the issue without people responding with questions, challenges, etc. Moving around the circle, each student responds one by one. The circle format contributes to building a non-competitive classroom and to creating space for people to express themselves in whatever way they wish. As Aboriginal educator Jean Graveline (1998) writes:

**CIRCLE AS PEDAGOGY.**

*Builds Community.*
*Listen Respectfully to learn what the needs are.*
*Gives everyone a sense of worthiness*
*Being valued … Listened to … Respected.*
*Circle as Pedagogy*
*Brings Healing.*

*Strengthening the Individual… In-Relation to the Community.*
*Strong role models Inspire others to Grow and Change.*

“A search for dominance free forms of interaction.”
*Challenge the dichotomies between Knower and Knowledge*
Reason and Emotion.
Build bridges between School and Community.
Personal healing and professional development.
Healing and teaching.
Heal and educate the Community … not only the Individual.

Participants’ responses about circle work in the W2B classroom resonate with Graveline’s poem. For most participants, with the exception of those who were Aboriginal, the circle was a new learning modality. Students highlighted the equalizing impact that work had on the learning environment and the significance of having the opportunity to hear a diverse set of opinions without fear of reprisal or judgement.

“… a freeing principle of the circle is that you don’t have to feel like you’re being singled out or put on the spot in any way. I found that the Walls to Bridges circle experience was incredibly empowering because it accounted for those power dynamics.” - CAITLI (OUTSIDE STUDENT)

“No one’s better than anybody else … We were all learning from each other. There was no one person that was like, okay I’m the boss. Nothing like that. It was all equal. It was everyone had their chance to speak and say their opinion on how they felt about the readings or what they had learned or if they had researched something. I really enjoyed it. I’m already going to be judged. I have a criminal record … For the people that are from the outside coming in, and for them to be able to look at us in, like, not under any kind of lens – that was really cool.” - JESSICA (INSIDE STUDENT)

“I felt that, having the circle format, I was able to listen to different people and learn from different people. And there’s still the leader and sort of setting the format, but it really opened up to everybody as teachers and everybody as learners, and I really liked that.” - BETH (OUTSIDE STUDENT)

When talking about their experiences of how stereotypes and assumptions were challenged, the dominant theme arising in the interviews was the idea of being connected or feeling a connection.

“Any fears or stigmas we might have had were brought down. As an Inside student, I didn’t feel like the Outside students were staring at us, like an exhibit in a zoo. They just saw us as other students. They didn’t know anything about our cases. They didn’t know anything about why we’re here. We’re just other students working on the same program and discussing the same world issues. It was very liberating to feel a part of the world still – connected, even though we’re behind.” - FRANCES

Feeling connected resulted in the dismantling of various labels and categories that tend to divide people from each other. Inside students for example, started to see themselves as equally capable of completing a university course and to view outside students as also having experienced social, economic and personal challenges. An inside student, Chica, for example,
stated that initially she assumed that outside students “don’t even know what I’ve been through. Nobody’s even walked a quarter of a mile in my shoes,” but throughout the course she discovered that we “are more alike you than you know.”

Similarly, some outside students reflected on the commonalities they shared with some of their inside classmates and the realization that their own life trajectories could have also led them into conflict with the law. For example, Caitli states that she realized that:

“…for the first time [I saw myself] as someone who could quite easily be incarcerated, you know, at the drop of a hat… and I really was able to see it for the first time from the perspective of people inside, living in that system. It was life-changing.”

Other outside students expressed similar realizations, including an awareness of how social processes can lead some women into conflict with the law:

“…all of those women in there, that could have been me. There are so many various different ways in which the trajectory of our lives can put us in that place. So just having that understanding and that knowledge, I feel like was one of the biggest things I walked away with from the class.” - NELLY

“And it really hit me that if circumstances in my life were tweaked slightly, that I could very much be on the inside. It struck me – the commonality. Not the difference, but how alike everything was, and how connected I was to the entire system of it all.” - ALEX

“….many times, especially through the relationships that I built, I thought to myself, wow if I had gotten caught for x-y-z actions, I could have very well been in someone else’s shoes, and I could have very well been incarcerated. So those degrees of separation that I think society tells us need to be there, were absolutely blurred.” - RACHEL

“… if there was one thing in my life that was different, like one minor thing, it could quite be possible that I could be inside. - SHORTY

In summary, one of the key impacts of taking a W2B class on both groups of students was the relational and intellectual connections made between two groups of students who are not normally considered ‘peers’ and the development of a learning community between and across these differences. The notions that the class “takes away the labels” and that “some people are more like you than you know” were common sentiments expressed by participants in this study. The personal connections and teaching pedagogy was identified as central to the process of becoming aware of and dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions that prevent authentic connections between those who are outside and incarcerated peoples.
2. COMMITMENT TO SOCIAL JUSTICE AND ACTION

One of the central themes that emerged in the interviews with students was that taking W2B classes ‘opened my eyes’ to local and global issues related to inequalities and social justice. The courses taken by participants in the study were Social Work courses which generally include topics and themes related to justice, equality, and social change. While some students did reflect on what they learned from particular course content, for the most part it was the class process itself that produced a new or renewed commitment to social action. A strong theme throughout the interviews was the idea of ‘taking action’ or ‘being part of the solution’ towards reducing social inequalities. Particularly striking was the sense expressed by many students that their new awareness of various forms of local and global social inequalities led them to feeling ‘accountable’ for making change in their own communities (whether the prison community or the ‘free’ community). For some students, feeling accountable was expressed in regard to the criminal justice system.

“I can honestly say I didn’t know this [how prison life is] existed. And you’re starting to wonder, how can I make things better? How can I not be a part of the problem? How can I be a part of the solution? …. I have the opportunity to change so many things when I leave this place (prison)… It’s just an eye-opener.” - BECCA (INSIDE STUDENT)

“I think that I have a greater awareness now of what some of the issues are in prison systems. I have a greater interest when I hear things in the media or in the news when I see issues come up that are related to incarceration, related to criminal justice. I just have a very new sense of investment, of interest, and passion really about trying to be part of creating more social justice.” - CAITLI (OUTSIDE STUDENT)

Many students articulated a commitment to working towards alleviating marginalization and engaging in social change efforts. Students frequently used the world “community” to refer to a sense of interconnectedness, accountability, and shared purpose that they felt evolved through the class. Students expressed the significance of building “a community in an unlike-ly place with unlikely people” (Maline) and spoke of how the classroom experience rippled out into other communities (like the prison or workplace) of which they were a part. One central ripple effect was that students said they felt responsible and able to work towards social change in their various settings; that they could have a ‘voice’ and the ability to break down other types of barriers placed between people. Rachel, an outside student, stated that she has never “felt like I was really connecting with anyone” and “never got that true feeling” until taking a W2B class, which “really has taught me to feel what it’s like to be in a community and how important that sense of community is for social justice.”

“What is my role in trying to either alleviate oppression or in perpetrating oppression? You know, what responsibility do I have? … Not only what responsibility do I have, but how can I convert that into action?” - ALEX (OUTSIDE STUDENT)
“… it gave me a new perspective on not just what I knew in here, but what was going on outside. It even helped me to start watching the news more, because I started getting … It felt like I was more involved in being able to watch the news and wanting to change this. Or I felt like this wasn’t right or what can we do to make this better?” - CHELSEA (INSIDE STUDENT)

“… [We were] having a conversation about community accountability and lots of hopeless feelings about the way power is misused in our society… I remember one of my Inside classmates just saying, you know, ‘we have to be the ones to hold them accountable, and we have to hold each other accountable. Like, it’s up to us’… It was kind of like one of those light bulb moments that no one’s going to … It’s our responsibility.” - MICHELLE (OUTSIDE STUDENT)

In summary, participants said that the course content and process of creating a community fostered a sense of personal accountability and commitment towards challenging social inequalities. Students who were incarcerated felt enough trust and confidence in the outside students to share with them some of what they were experiencing as criminalized and incarcerated women. The ‘lived experience’ aspect of the courses dovetailed with course content and allowed students to analyse and reflect upon the larger social dynamics and structures that influence people’s experience of the criminal justice system. The sense of community that outside students experienced and the dialogue with their incarcerated peers, not only educated them about criminal justice issues but enabled a broader understanding of how lived experienced (their own and others) is shaped by social inequalities. The shared goal of both students (and instructors) of learning and talking across social barriers was an additional aspect of how community was created. The resulting sense of community provoked a collective sense and commitment toward social justice and action.
3. HOLISTIC LEARNING: “IT’S NOT EVEN WHAT I LEARNED – IT WAS WHO I BECAME.”

Students’ responses about the transformative impact of taking a W2B class were striking in terms of the far-reaching effects of a one semester course. They spoke of the impact on their self-esteem, sense of belonging, family relationships, personal agency, attitudes, and their behaviour. The circle pedagogy and learning from each other’s personal life experiences were key factors leading to personal growth that went beyond the classroom context itself. A repetitive theme through the interviews, from both inside and outside students, was the idea of ‘finding a voice’.

“I felt encouraged and I felt respected, so it made me very comfortable very quickly, and I was very surprised. I felt my voice grew. Like, every class I went to, I had more to say, and I felt comfortable saying it. Whereas, in previous university settings, I rarely spoke and rarely put up my hand, you know what I mean? I was afraid of that competitive aspect, so a lot of things went unsaid. And I never really voiced my opinion.” - **HANNAH (INSIDE STUDENT)**

“I learned a lot about myself. I learned how important it is to be present. I learned to trust my own voice and that it’s okay to express my voice. I learned about all kinds of assumptions that I carry and how that inevitably will impact how I interact with the world, and how the world interacts with me.” - **RACHEAL (OUTSIDE STUDENT)**

The reduced hierarchal relationships between students and between students and facilitators created a space in which students were able to reflect not only on the subject matter but on their own place in the world, assumptions and ways of relating to others.

“I mean better, just like, honing on skills that in a normal university environment would have never promoted within myself, because I thought well, I’m not writing the way they want me to write, and I’m not answering the way they want me to answer, there is a right answer to this. They encourage that here. They encourage that kind of diversity. I realized that this really helped me as a person. It’s not even what I learned – it was who I became.” - **CAITLINE (INSIDE STUDENT)**

The notion of ‘bringing our authentic self’ permeates circle work and W2B classes. Students stated that the non-competitive environment and the integrative or holistic nature of the learning – weaving together personal experience, academic theory, and emotions – facilitated a deeper learning experience than in conventional classrooms. Similar to the idea expressed above by Caitline, other students alluded to the notion that these classes fostered a space “to be a human, rather than to be like an intellectual brain” or was ‘relationship-based rather than content-based” leading to a sense that their learning was a holistic process.
“…you did the academic work kind of before class, but then actually in class was connecting…kind of drawing a link between the academics with what’s real life. And people’s personal experiences, and their emotions, and what they’ve lived through.” - GRACE (OUTSIDE STUDENT)

“…we had to present ourselves with a certain level of honesty and integrity. The classroom environment was particularly different and it explored how we could be more human while presenting our ideas.” - JOSE (OUTSIDE STUDENT)

Student’s emphasized the significance of being permitted to bring their full selves into the classroom, drawing upon knowledge that comes from lived experience as well as from academic texts.

“…if I hadn’t had my own experiences to apply them to, I may not have understood the concepts, because it was very different.” - BARBARA (INSIDE STUDENT)

“We all have differences in us. That’s just the way we are made up – our life experiences, our genetic make-up, culture, religion, sex – all the isms you might want to think of, we’re all different. This type of learning experience embraces those differences. It doesn’t highlight them and it doesn’t make them an ugly thing. It just makes them something that we have and something that we bring.” - CHICA (INSIDE STUDENT)

The comments in this section reflect the sense that the W2B pedagogy is holistic and non-competitive and mixes ‘book learning’ with ‘street smarts’. Students who had or were taking courses on university or college campus felt their ‘voice’ was valued in the W2B classroom because they did not have ‘regurgitate’ back material that the professor presented and were encouraged to think carefully about their own opinions and assumptions, where they come from and how they have developed. Students said that the circle format, which involves listening quietly and carefully to each person’s words, revealed so many different perspectives, experiences and ways of seeing and knowing which they felt fostered a nuanced and deeper understanding of the course concepts than do lectures and power points. Further, the ability to draw upon lived experiences and explore these with their peers within the analytical framework of the course, was considered ‘transformative’. 
Participants also had recommendations for improving the program. These fell into two broad categories: i) instructor facilitation skills and ii) enhancing access to this type of educational modality.

1. INSTRUCTOR FACILITATION

Most of the suggestions for improvement related to instructor facilitation in regard to achieving a balance of providing structure and information while also allowing sufficient space for students to guide the process. Several students employed poignant metaphors to describe how they see role of the instructor:

“I think of the instructor almost as the bass player in a band … they’re kind of the one that’s there to kind of smooth over the edges, the glue that keeps everyone together, but at no time are they the rock star of the show.” - CAITLI (OUTSIDE STUDENT)

“[The instructor] was like the Sherpa of the group....She was there to facilitate, but she never interjected wherever she didn’t need to. …a person with expertise, a person that was there to share her knowledge.” - CHICA (INSIDE STUDENT)

In order to help achieve the balance of being a ‘Sherpa’ or a ‘bass player’ students suggested the following:

• Strike a balance between creating structure and activities for the class and leaving lots of space for students to take ownership and leadership over class process.

• Create opportunities for student to co-facilitate, e.g. ask for volunteers to think of an activity to deal with the readings, facilitate class discussion, lead an ice breaker, open or close the circle.

• Make sure you intentionally cover the readings in an active way.

• Do ice breakers for at least the first 3-4 classes to help with class cohesion and bonding.
• Have a strategy for managing time in the circle.

• Be sensitive to how much reading is required and provide readings of various kinds – e.g. poems, prose, theory, first person, academic research for different learning styles and educational backgrounds.

• Get more Indigenous professors teaching these courses.

II. INCREASE ACCESS TO WALLS TO BRIDGES COURSES

Students also recommended that W2B increase access to this type of teaching model both inside and outside of correctional institutions.

• Make W2B classes more accessible to more people by holding them in other sites such as hospitals, high schools, old age homes, psychiatric care facilities, shelters

• Hold a forum in the correctional institution or facility and involve staff to illustrate what the program is about and how the pedagogy works

  … whether it’d be personal workers, or PWs, or parole officers, or the people who teach the programming … having them be part of it, so that they can kind of grasp different ways of learning. Because they can apply this tool to anything that they do. This is a different way of talking to people, a different way of listening, because a lot of these people don’t have a good grasp of active listening.

• Create opportunities for students to continue similar work together in the community e.g. develop reading groups, put on workshops, engage in advocacy work

• Lobby the government to fund the programs to spread across all jails and prisons in Canada
To help us better understand the impact of Walls to Bridges teaching on students we would like to ask you some questions about your experiences in the Wilfrid Laurier Walls to Bridges class that you took. Your reflections will help us evaluate student learning and assess what is working well and what could be changed in regard to the teaching model.

**EXPECTATIONS AND MOTIVATIONS**

1. Thinking back, what motivated your interest in taking an Walls to Bridges course?

2. What ideas did you have about what it might be like having inside and outside students studying together in a prison?

3. Students W2B classes have their first class of the semester separate – inside students meet alone with the instructor and outside students do the same. Can you describe what it was like for you the first time the whole class came together? What feelings, thoughts and experiences did you have during that class?

**WALLS TO BRIDGES PEDAGOGY**

1. Walls to Bridges classes are not run like conventional university classes. Can you describe your experiences of working in a circle format? What was it like for you to be in conversation/dialogue within this format? (Probes re: dehierarchized pedagogy)

2. In what other ways did the structure and format of the course impact your experience?

3. What did you learn from engaging in a dialogue in this particular way?

4. How did you perceive the role of the course instructor?

5. How does trust get established in a W2B classroom? When can trust get ruptured?
6. Walls to Bridges classes encourage all students to take responsibility, along with the facilitator, for the classroom experience and learning. How did your classroom experience reflect this?

7. Can you reflect upon a moment or moments during which you experienced some discomfort? What happened? What was the impact?

8. Can you describe a classroom situation or conversation that strongly affected you? (Probes: what was it that was so impactful? How did you respond?)

9. All W2B classes involve a collaborative class project. Can you describe what this was like for you personally? What were some of the challenges? What did you learn from this collaborative project?

10. Walls to Bridges is called experiential learning. This means students reflect upon the interaction between what they are reading in the assigned texts, their assignments, and the actual experience of being in the class. What was it like for you to personally experience many of the concepts and topics you were studying?

PRISONS AND UNIVERSITIES

1. Prior to taking a Walls to Bridges class, what kinds of experiences and/or opinions did you have about prisons and incarcerated people? Can you describe ways that your opinions may have shifted from taking W2B class and why this might have happened?

2. Prior to taking a W2B class, what kinds of opinions about universities or university students did you have? Can you describe ways that your opinions may have shifted from taking a W2B class and why this might have happened?

3. What did you learn or experience in regard to ideas about ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’ by taking a W2B course?

IMPACT ON SELF AND COMMUNITY

1. Please talk about any ways that your involvement in W2B may have influenced your understanding of community and social justice.

2. Walls to Bridges teaching is often referred to as ‘transformative education.’ Can you comment on this idea of W2B being transformative? (probes: what does it transform? How does this happen? Are there personal and social facets to the transformation?)

3. Now that X months have passed, reflecting back can you see ways in which you continue to
be influenced or impacted by your W2B experience? (Probes: impacts on sense of self or agency?; impacts on engagement in community? approach to work or those with whom they work?)

**CONCLUDING**

1. Do you have any thoughts about ways the learning experience of a W2B could be enhanced?
2. Is there anything else you would like to add that I have not asked?
Report on the
IMPACT ON
STUDENTS

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Introduction

In *A Hidden Wholeness* Parker Palmer speaks of the healing power of ‘circles of trust’ in which communication is about reflection, collaboration and listening, rather than explaining, advising or helping (Palmer 2014). This basic premise underpins the Walls to Bridges (W2B) program, a university-based educational program in which incarcerated and non-incarcerated students study together for semester-long courses in a correctional setting. Courses are for-credit and are offered in a variety of disciplines such as Social Work, Criminology, English Literature, Sociology, Urban Studies, Philosophy and Gender Studies. W2B is an experiential learning model designed to create spaces of analysis, reflection and action within university classes held in prisons. While not a
‘therapeutic’ service, both incarcerated and university-based students report that participation in this program cultivates a sense of personal ‘voice’ and agency and creates a community of learners that feels personally healing and socially transformative (Pollack 2016).

This chapter is a collaboration between Denise, a formerly incarcerated alumnus of W2B classes and Shoshana, an instructor of W2B classes and the director of the National W2B program in Canada. In this chapter, we explore several aspects of the W2B program that students experience as healing and transformative (Pollack 2016): these include W2B’s commitment to destabilising power in the classroom, avoiding stigmatising labels and categories, and developing a classroom space in which ‘difference’ is valued. In keeping with W2B principles that honour lived experiences as sources of knowledge, we have written this chapter using first-person narration to explore the transformative impact of W2B classes. Shoshana begins the chapter by outlining the central components of the W2B program pedagogy and how it differs from both conventional university education and correctional programs. This is followed by Denise’s account of the ways in which race, class and gender dynamics shaped her experiences of (un)belonging in Canada (which were then reproduced while incarcerated) and her contrasting experiences of being a W2B student. In this chapter, we discuss how lived experience, non-stigmatising discourses and practices, and mutually reciprocal relationships are crucial for cultivating mental health for incarcerated people.

The Walls to Bridges Program: Creating a Learning Community Within a Prison Classroom

Based on the U.S. Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the Canadian W2B program shares many of its practices and premises.¹ I (Shoshana) took the seven day Inside-Out instructor training in the United States in 2011. Although we have made changes to suit the Canadian cultural and correctional context, pedagogically we use a similar teaching model as described by Lori Pompa (2013), founder of the Inside-Out
Prison Exchange Program. Inside-Out and Walls to Bridges classes are not about students from the ‘outside’ helping, researching, or mentoring incarcerated students; but rather all students study academic material together within the context of a classroom in a prison or jail. Further, the instructor of a W2B class is considered a facilitator of the learning process—she or he does not lecture but through a variety of teaching techniques holds the space in which students can explore complex and challenging ideas from a variety of perspectives, lived experiences, and contexts.

For many instructors, this can be daunting as we have been trained to consider ourselves experts and to think of education as only effective if delivered through the ‘banking model’ (Freire 1970) in which we ‘deposit’ our knowledge into the minds of students. Both Inside-Out and W2B consider the instructor a facilitator and develop teaching tools that help to destabilise power relations between professor and student and between students themselves. The Canadian W2B program has been influenced by Indigenous Elders and Indigenous scholars such Dr. Pricilla Settee, Larry Morrison, Gayle Cyr and Dr. Kathy Absolon, all of whom participated in circles with us, and provided teachings on Indigenous holistic ways of knowing. The use of learning circles, in which participants take turns speaking while others reflectively listen, is integral to Indigenous ways of learning and healing (Hart 2002).

Participants are encouraged to listen openly and reflectively to the perspectives of others and to their own inner dialogue. In W2B classes, this fosters a classroom climate that values different perspectives and supports an understanding of self as situated within the contexts of gender, race, class, culture, sexual orientation and other forms of othering. Such an approach is particularly well suited for working with students who may be living in very different contexts, such as those who are incarcerated and those who are not. Incarcerated students enter into W2B classes feeling concerned that the university or ‘outside’ students will look down on them, judge them as stupid or as ill-equipped for university level studies (Pollack 2016). A pedagogy that explicitly values all sorts of knowledge, including lived experience and emotions, creates an inclusive learning environment.
We have also been influenced by Parker Palmer, a U.S. Quaker and educator. In *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward An Undivided Life*, Palmer (2014) outlines principles and guidelines for creating a community that fosters a space in which authenticity is encouraged and valued; in which a ‘whole self’ is permitted to emerge. In W2B, we do this by explicitly valuing emotions, spirit, body, and mind as legitimate forms of knowledge and by creating in-class activities that foster reflective listening, rather than debating or competing for the ‘right’ answer. Instead, as Palmer (2014) writes:

> We speak from our own center to the center of the circle— to the receptive heart of the communal space— where what we say will be held attentively and respectfully. This way of speaking differs markedly from everyday conversations in which we speak from our own intellect or ego directly to the intellect or ego of someone on whom we hope to have an impact. (p. 118)

Not only is this a countercultural approach to conventional university teaching but it also deviates from most correctional programming. Correctional programming is typically cognitive-behavioural, explicitly designed to change thinking patterns and behaviours considered to be criminogenic. The facilitator is considered the expert on the material and the very purpose of such program is to impact/change participants’ selves (Kendall and Pollack 2003). If participants fail to adopt the discursive framing of crime and criminality promoted in these programs, they are considered to be ‘engaging in “techniques of neutralisation” which Sykes and Matza (1957) describe as the discursive methods through which individuals justify their delinquent or illegal actions’ (Fayter 2016, p. 60).

People experiencing incarceration are rarely considered ‘knowers’ or as having much to contribute to understandings of mental health, crime, addiction and other social issues. In contrast, all students and instructors in W2B classes are considered both teachers and learners who have intellectual, experiential, academic and emotional knowledge important for the exploration of course content. As it is a university-class, not a correctional program, there is no focus on criminogenic
factors, changing behaviour, or labelling. In fact, our classes adopt Palmer’s suggestion that there be ‘no fixing, no advising, no setting each other straight’ (2014, p. 115) so that we can foster an environment in which students collaboratively explore the course materials from their own unique perspectives and contexts, without fear of being admonished or diminished.

Narratives About Criminalised Women and Mental Health

I worked as a psychotherapist in a women’s prison before I became an academic. I worked with a group of feminist psychologists and social workers to provide trauma counselling, group work, and advocacy for the women inside. These early experiences form the foundation of my commitment to shared work with criminalised women, challenging professional (correctional, psychiatric, psychological) discourses that decontextualise lived experience from social structures; and promoting continual reflexivity in practice and research. The W2B program contributes to destabilising public, legal, correctional and academic discourses that pathologise women’s mental health by individualising behaviours without placing them within the context of lived experience of poverty, gendered violence, racism and colonialism. In W2B classes, we do this in part, by valuing incarcerated students’ own analyses of what they have experienced within the criminal justice system and in their lives more generally. Although no student (incarcerated or otherwise) is expected to share any particular aspect of their lives, the circle process and small group activities allow opportunities to use course material to reflect on lived experience; therefore, personal stories are sometimes shared in the interest of developing a more robust understanding of course content and academic scholarship.

Over the past 27 years, I have been to countless conferences, have read hundreds of articles on ‘female offenders’, and have seen endless and repetitive statistics on the mental health, substance use, mothering, and behavioural problems of criminalised women. Yet, only on
the rare occasion are the subjects of all this analysis and intervention given an opportunity to represent themselves and their own perspectives on crime and punishment. Of course, there are occasional opportunities for incarcerated people to share their stories at some criminological and/or correctional conferences and workshops. Nonetheless, how these stories are shared and structured is typically shaped by the agenda of those who are putting on the event, and thus they often take the predictable shape of a reformation narrative, identifying low self-esteem, faulty thinking, and poor choices as criminogenic factors. The hegemony of this narrative frame means that alternative ways of constructing self and experience are rendered unthinkable and thus unspeakable. As a researcher and scholar, I have examined the ways in which criminological and correctional discourses obscure social context and promulgate the subjectivity of women in prison as cognitively deficient, difficult to ‘manage’ and mentally unstable (Pollack 2007, 2009, 2010, 2012). Reflecting upon this, Tiina Eldridge describes the way she experienced and responded to correctional discursive framings while she was incarcerated. She writes:

I regurgitated my story over and over and molded my life to fit the shape of the correctional discourse to explain how I was broken and a risk to society but how—by accessing prison programs and education—I was being “fixed” and it would soon be safe to return me to society… Now, having been free for almost two years and having had the opportunity to study and analyze the gendered scripts women prisoners are required to perform, I feel somewhat differently. I actually feel a lot of guilt and shame about being brainwashed into being a correctional puppet. (Pollack and Eldridge 2015, p. 135)

As Eldridge’s analysis illustrates, simply providing opportunities for narratives of ‘lived experience’ to be included in discussions about mental health and prisoners is not sufficient. The dominant framework for how lived experience of mental health problems is narrated is so rigid that it has been called ‘patient porn’ to signal how personal narratives can be exploited in order to promote and validate a given treatment method or program (Costa et al. 2012).
W2B aims to disrupt ‘canned’ and official versions of who a criminal ‘is’ (and other categories such as gender, race, and mental health that rely upon binaries and labels) through several means. Firstly, in class activities designed to facilitate relationships and mutual exploration of course content, a process that ‘outside’ students attribute to dispelling assumptions and stereotypes about imprisoned people (Pollack 2016). Secondly, if students or instructors are sharing personal experiences, it is done largely within the context of the course material, to shed light on the theoretical or practice concepts being illustrated, rather than as a way to ‘tell a story’ about crime, addictions or mental health. This helps to mediate the reproduction of dominant discourses in narrations of self. Finally, a number (8 so far) of W2B undergraduate and graduate alumni are contributing to the literature on education and criminal justice (as is the case in this current chapter), thereby redefining the scholarship on criminalised women from the perspective of lived experience of incarceration.2

The following section is written by Denise, in first-person narrative form, in keeping with her choices for self-expression. Denise writes about the challenges of growing up in a white settler country that privileges those with white skin and middle-class status and the relationship between feeling excluded and being criminalised. She sets this context to illustrate for the reader the powerful impact of W2B. While in prison, W2B classes reduced her need for psychotherapeutic medications and helped her feel accepted and valued, resulting in feeling a sense of community connection—of belonging—for one of the first times in her life. Since being released from prison, Denise has continued working with W2B to conduct workshops and trainings and to spread the word about this innovative pedagogy. She is also a published fiction writer.

Denise

School began as the place my siblings and peers absolutely had to reach every Monday to Friday between the hours of 8:50 a.m.–3:20 p.m. come sun or snow. It was a trek of four city streets from my front door to the school’s main entrance. It was the place we would spend most of
our productive hours. At school, we would concentrate on the three Rs even though in essence there was only a single R in the equation. There were thirty of us in my grade three class. Room 303’s wooden desks served as our storage for school supplies: pencil crayons, text books, the odd contraband of an assortment of candies and bubble gum, along with empty crinkly wrappers. Life was hard enough at seven, eight, nine, ten eleven years old. In those days, we lived by two universal rules: (One) Try to obey your parents as much as possible as to not have to experience the adage of ‘If you can’t hear, you will feel’. And trust me, you didn’t want to feel whatever that thick brown leather belt felt like on your butt. (Two) Try to obey your teacher as much as possible so as not to warrant them calling your parents; again, so you don’t have to experience Rule Number One.

My conscience dramatically shifted early one Saturday morning while I was in the eighth grade. Rather than sleeping in for the weekend I arose early and tiptoed into the kitchen and poured myself a bowl of cornflakes before I settled in front of the television to watch some of my favourite cartoons. I heard the muted echo of my father’s trumpet in the den and I made a beeline to greet him. He immediately felt my presence and stopped blowing. The angle of the rising winter morning’s sunlight gave him a lift to his six feet two-inch frame.

‘It’s Saturday morning, remember?’
‘Morning’, I replied

‘Isn’t this the day regular teenagers slept in’? he asked sarcastically. We exchanged friendly banter while I ate my breakfast and I then I remembered my cartoons. I was appropriately clad in hunter green flannel pajamas for the fast approaching merriest of seasons and before I had a chance to completely exit in thick woollen socks my father asked me what I thought was a strange question.

‘Hey, who’s your ultimate hero or heroine? Everyone has at least one person who has challenged them in one way or the next to be the best person they can be. And by the way, your answer can’t be an athlete or an entertainer’.

‘Hmm’? was my response. My fourteen-year-old brain didn’t want to ponder over the question. Besides, the answer was cutting into my cartoon time.
Who do I admire to the extent that I’d like to mirror my life’s mission in their shadow? The only person I thought of was getting impatient with me. I watched as his grey eyes shifted from me to his metronome where he adjusted the speed to a slow-paced beat. He was working on the scales to a Chuck Mangione song? Feels So Good. It was the instrumental that made me feel as good as the title suggested without any crooning.

‘So who is it?’ He queried once again.

‘What if I was to tell you that its…you?’

‘Apart from your mother or I. As a matter of fact, why don’t you narrow it down to someone who looks like you and has made a significant positive impact to the world’. Is there such a person? He was making it harder for me to answer him every time he opened his mouth. My father removed his bread and butter from the stand and before he brought the instrument to the middle of his lips he looked at me once more and reminded me our conversation would resume at a later day. My father planted a seed in my head that many years later, a stranger by the name of Parker Palmer, would help to fertilise.

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Innocence lost is never found and some children strive better in a balanced setting of the so-called traditional nuclear family structure or else they test every boundary imagined. I’m not knocking single parenthood or any of the other forms of parenting and making a family. Love is love, period. My family dynamics were changing but so was my body. It started playing some serious tricks on me that I didn’t appreciate. Ever the athletic type, my initial resistance to accept(ing) the ‘achy growing glands’ deep in my chest with an odd contraption called a training bra empowered me. Despite taking many a basketball and volleyball assault tossed in with the odd deliberate elbow blows to that danger area, I’d cringe and in true teenage sportswomanship fashion, keep on.

When Mother Nature threw this late bloomer the ultimate dreaded period, I reluctantly threw my hands up in the air. I didn’t want to but I had no choice but to surrender. There was no getting around that one. Just when society and church were finally kind enough to allow women of child bearing age control over their reproductive system with
the simple act of swallowing a pill daily, why couldn’t somebody, anybody, some capital hungry pharmaceutical company, find a tablet to rid me of the biggest interruption at probably the best phase of my life? Accepting the commencement of that era was the hardest part my being had to accept. While other girls I knew were happily jumping around embracing the inevitable inconvenience, I kept my hatred for it to myself. My teenaged world was getting complicated. Despite openly pining away for my father, my trust for him was getting scarcer than my mother’s single paycheck’s ability to continuously provide for four children the way their combined incomes used to. Ripple effects confirmed our family fears that ‘change was “ah comin”’. First, in a world where cellular phones were still unthinkable, there were the subtle signs when our single stationary landline lacked incoming calls to my popular father. His absence was felt as he came home every few days and then by month to month. The weaning process was obvious. His unpicked-up mail with the deceptive title of Mr. typed in bold black letters reinforced our perceptions of societal norms that we might lose our ever-important Alpha patriarch. If I was still in denial, a classmate’s snide remark proved a reality check: ‘How come your father doesn’t pick you guys up from school anymore? Where is he? Blah, blah, blah…’ Being privy to the growing number of mother-led homes contributed to a bitter burning from deep within because compliance to the lowered notch on the student social totem pole was standard. The new normal. I used friends, music, books and for the most part, school to fill my days. ‘…someone who looks like you and has made a significant positive impact to the world’. Still, I missed my father.

It was right around that time in my life when I started processing what I was being taught in school. I was new to high school and a newfound self-awareness sparked questions about my place in the world and the skills necessary for me to successfully navigate that world. By the tenth grade, it was getting harder for me to see a place in the world for myself and the dread of my grades falling further to the rear than my designated seat in the back of the class was real. The disconnection of my intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual selves was fuelled by the disillusion of memorisation and regurgitating one-dimensional information. But hunger was my cruel taskmaster and since I had
acquired a taste for knowledge, I’d forge my own path to find answers to questions not readily available in any textbook I ever opened.

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Down in the dimly lit basement another world existed. There was fierce competition for available personal space. There was not even any elbow to elbow movements, it was standing room only. The struggle for air, respect and concrete space for our feet to balance intensified as the drum and bass transformed ordinary strangers into a frenzy of tribal camaraderie. The music spoke to us, through us and for us. Of the four walls, three were occupied by couples intertwined and gyrating to precisely timed beats. The fourth wall was specifically reserved for the several turntables and an array of records. Crates of prized forty-fives and thirty-threes were balanced on long banquet style tables awaiting their turn to alter the many moods music was guilty of creating. Once the selector’s gifted fingers instinctively plucked a vinyl disc, the patrons showed their approval by slapping any available surface with open hands or pleaded with the appreciative cry of ‘Wheel and come again, selector’. It took me no time to realise the phrase was meant as an encore.

It didn’t matter that my fresh chemically relaxed hair, European straight only several hours prior, had kinked up in an undesired afro. Nor did it occur to me that the visibly older man who had me pinned against ‘our’ slice of the wall had managed to rub some of his blue denim dye onto the crotch area of the cream coloured skirt I snuck from my older sister’s closet. The cigarette and marijuana scent wafted in the hot, damp air as naturally as if it had all the right to.

Reluctant as I was earlier to sneak out with my best friend Jo-Ann, I didn’t want the night to end. And end it did with the threat of two women promising to crack open the others’ head with empty Heineken bottles.

The scent of some type of curried stew greeted me before I came to the top of the main level and I would have joined the line-up for a large portion except my dancing partner was intent on getting me out into the fresh morning air for the chance to exchange landline phone numbers. It is still hard to understand how people courted pre-cell phone days.
Several weeks of stimulating conversations with my father-figure lover-man and a mother who couldn’t control me led this barely seventeen-year-old to believe I was a grown woman. My West Indian mother was firm and under her roof, her authority was law. My options were limited. They were to listen to my mother or leave her abode. In a heated argument over some trivial matter, I grabbed an overnight bag and headed to notorious Jane and Finch (a low-income neighbourhood in Toronto, Ontario, Canada) where I was sure I’d be the mistress of my own destiny.

The next seventeen years saw me through an array of emotions and experiences I assumed were only privy to people who looked like me. The constant battle with my partner’s ‘baby momma’ drama; witnessing the startled look on strangers’ faces whenever I informed them of my undesirable address; the anger of being trailed, monitored and followed in department stores by security and sales clerks regardless of my having more than enough funds to pay for any item I desired. The frustration of letting my mother down for not pursuing every immigrant’s dream of their children attaining a higher education. But those feelings paled in comparison to the feeling of not being included in the only country that I knew.

The deep void my heart felt at my father’s abandonment fuelled my every justification. When a loved one is lost, there is a void that seems impossible to fill. Yes, I sold drugs. If I didn’t, someone else would. I’d purchase stolen goods from anyone skilled enough to get away with it. Those were just the tip of the iceberg of some of the shady things I did. So when the long hand of the law caught up with me and I was sentenced to do a federal bit at Grand Valley Institution for Women, I hunkered down to finding out about myself in a world that I thought considered me invisible.

Blog entry published on December 9, 2014 on the Center for Courage and Renewal website, the organisation run by Parker Palmer (http://www.couragerenewal.org/listening-truth/)

To: Parker Palmer
From: Denise, Grand Valley Institution for Women, Kitchener, ON

Dear Mr. Palmer, you see, I was unsuccessful in my quest for higher education. The conventional classroom/lecture setting did absolutely
nothing for me. The deliveries of the teachers were impersonal and sometimes I was strategically seated at the rear of the class. There was such a separation with regards to me, the teacher and the students. I felt disconnected and the experience became too overwhelming for me to enjoy learning. I will confess that I was not successful in acquiring the needed credits to pursue my ultimate dreams of a degree in Sociology or Humanities. So, broken, I dropped out of school.

I am currently incarcerated at a Canadian federal institution for women. The last thing I need is sympathy. What was meant to break me has turned into the biggest blessing of my life.

I was introduced to the Walls to Bridges Program where I learned about you and embraced circle pedagogy. Initially, I avoided your material like the plague but once I did accept it, I was hooked on your concepts. ‘No fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight’. In this information age we are living in, I could not have imagined that suggestion being passed along, much less adapted.

Stubborn as I am, I did not want to confess that a white upper-middle or upper-class man has impacted my way of life. You have taught me how to trust my inner teacher and most of all to speak my own truth. Black, female, and to further add to my intersectionality, I am a federally incarcerated student at Grand Valley Institution for Women. And I have learned the value and importance of listening to the truth of myself and others like you suggested. Had I been schooled in the circle pedagogy model from the elementary level I know it would have tremendously impacted my life in a positive, holistic way. I feel some unpleasant events I went through in my life might have been eliminated due to lack of support where my opinions were not valued. Because of circle learning, I am more aware of my feelings and fellow world citizens. We all have a story to tell and we should be allowed to voice our stories without fear of rejection.

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Is learning and teaching in a controlled facility—a federal penitentiary—worth any purpose other than the passing of some time while tax payers paid the bill? Why should normal people waste their time in such an abnormal place? Was it game on for the othering techniques to begin since I deliberately set my mind on being in a constant offensive state?
After all, wasn’t this one of those very places built for the monsters who should have no part of a functioning society? Well, since the larger portion of citizens apparently looked upon this alien of an **inmate** that way, I was mentally, physically and emotionally prepared to protect my fragile shell. From the very beginning, my first session with the outside students from Walls to Bridges was an interesting mixture of ‘me too’ and ‘really?’. In that sacred space, in the most unlikely of places, a group of ten inside students paired up with the same amount of outside students, realised they had much more in common than not. For the first time in my adult life, I was able to naturally fight off the seasonal misfortune of winter blues. **Seasonal Affected Disease** (SAD) was as real as my charge but for some reason, this season was not as gloomy as seasons past. Could I place a definite finger as to the diagnosis for the change in my so-called chemical imbalance? Not yet. ‘Well, if you’d like, maybe we could place you on another anti-depressant. Stopping cold-turkey is never a good idea and besides, there are other brands on the market’. That was the response I received from one of the nurses at the institution. Actually, that was the same response I got from another nurse, for to get such needed advice from the doctor meant submitting an institutional Request Form and patiently waiting for the doctor’s once per month or so visit. My life, my prison sentence forced me to take matters into my own hands. I decided to self-medicate with my weekly blister pack. Instead of popping the prescribed one tablet per day, I’d crack my hope in the form of a tablet in half. Each morning I’d separate two sides of the pill evenly at the score and wash it down with strong, hot, unsweetened black tea.

That winter, despite a severe ice storm and brutal winds enveloping our section of the true, north and free landscape, my moods were chipper. I had my readings to look forward to, my assignments and most of all I had a support system that I was very much a part of. It was at this point that I came to the conclusion that a chain really was as strong as the weakest link. You see, the more I reduced and boiled my observations down to the gravy of it all, I was sandwiched into an interconnectedness of being. There was a simple sharing with my classmates that brought about a profound uniqueness and acceptance.
By the fifth Walls to Bridges class, I was totally weaned off the medications prescribed to me with no sight in the near future of returning to them. Again, I must stress the fact that Walls to Bridges is not a form of therapy nor do I believe they’d want to take on such a monumental mission. There was no denying that my once-per-week class played an integral part in my decision to hop off the normal vs. not-normal, me vs. them, us vs. them mentality. Having the opportunity to teach and learn in a circle pedagogy made a difference. The breaking down of walls where traditional modes of teaching and learning were challenged by interjecting respect for one’s whole self, made all the difference. Once one sits in a circle environment and finds it in their heart and head to scrutinise their surroundings by claiming their voice, one will find that there truly is no ‘inside’ or ‘outside’. Once there is a Wall, our combined hearts and heads will move into the construction business of building bridges. Midway through my very first Walls to Bridges course, I grudgingly yet gingerly succumbed to the fact that the wonderful plethora of individuals I was blessed with teaching and learning with were in fact just like me. At the end of our magical time I met people I never would have thought experienced marginalisation or hurt. Despite their White privilege, I was privy to the world where cheques didn’t seem to balance. Week after week, I found out that despite one’s outward appearance, even with the blondest and bluest of some of their privileged eyes, being ‘othered’ was unavoidable. For the people who shared my weekly sacred circle, their gayness, queerness, dis’ability-ness, trans-ness, the sheer otherness of it all was reason to come to the conclusion that we were all a part of a mysterious whole and without us, well, we all might as well blend into the bland, grey canvas that dictated the Canadian horizon from September to April. Our uniqueness was an added bonus since we were allowed to embrace it all without fear of shame. We harnessed parts of ourselves that refused to reveal only segmented portions. We sought out to teach each other and in return, to learn from the other. We willingly gave whatever we had and accepted every other gift someone presented us with.

I did return to the institution’s Health Services for their assistance but not for any ‘head stuff’. By that time, I had successfully rid myself of the little oval tablet that was part of my daily ritual for the better
part of a half a century, I was also a half credit closer to the rest of my life. Talk about killing two birds with one stone because that was the closest I’d ever come to whatever rehabilitation Corrections Canada truly had to offer; plus that half a credit opportunity opened doors with ‘options to offenders’ engraved in gold. I had the choice to continue and add more university credits to my name or chuck the entire Walls to Bridges as an experience while in prison and something to pass time. In time, one half a credit led to one full university credit… and then two, and three and so on. The sheer act of building bridges through learning and teaching in any environment, whether controlled or not: priceless!!!

**Conclusion**

The kind of education and community-building that occurs in W2B is instructive about the role that relationships, destigmatisation and collective critical analysis can play in enhancing well-being and mental health. Plenty of scholarship has documented the fact that a very high percentage of women in prison have histories of childhood sexual abuse and male violence against women (Balfour and Comack 2014). Scholars have also illustrated how prison power dynamics reproduce those inherent in abusive relationships (Pollack and Brezina 2007), and the racist and colonial processes of white settler states (Razack 2015). While there are clearly power differentials between instructor and students, W2B instructors work collaboratively, drawing upon the gifts, knowledge and experiences of students to explore course material and create an equalitarian learning environment.

The integration of circle processes is pivotal in reducing power dynamics, in that group protocols allow for individual perspectives to be shared, drawing upon a ‘full self’ which includes intellectual, spiritual, emotional and experiential knowledge. Because W2B classes are university-based, they are not part of the correctional apparatus and thus are not required to scrutinise or assess for criminality and risk, thus
allowing incarcerated students to just be students. The experience of imprisonment is one in which labels and categorisations pervade daily life, and spaces in which prisoners can interact with non-incarcerated folks as ‘themselves’, without being diagnosed, assessed, classified or otherwise judged, can be liberating. W2B works towards avoiding conventional dichotomies and labels such as criminal/law abiding, mentally ill/mentally well, addict/not an addict, and abnormal/normal. Fayter (2016) a W2B student who was incarcerated when she published an article on W2B states:

I have been labelled an ‘addict’, ‘drug dealer’, ‘criminal’, ‘inmate’ and ‘convict’, and a ‘danger to the community’ by guards, parole officers, and others within the criminal justice and correctional system. Many people I know have been called much worse. Eventually, we begin to view ourselves through this lens…the W2B class is the single most humanizing and empowering aspect of my incarceration, replacing these negative labels and stereotypes with positive ones. (p. 59)

W2B’s focus on dispelling stigma and stereotypes and developing authentic connections with people on both side of the wall leads to transformation and a sense of belonging (Pollack 2016). As Denise states, in W2B classes:

there was an honesty about us. Our differences yet our sameness rendered us naked. The kind of stripping away that came with vulnerability, except there was no one to judge our rawness. For the duration of our studies we 

reclaimed our whole selves.

Notes

1. For information on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, see http://www.insideoutcenter.org/.
2. This is similar to the emergence of Convict Criminology (Newbold et al. 2014).
Bibliography


Complicity and Redemption: Beyond the Insider/Outsider Research Dichotomy

Shoshana Pollack & Tiina Eldridge

Since the 1970s, feminist researchers in criminology and other disciplines have engaged with ideas about voice, representation, inclusion, and authorized knowers in order to challenge male-biased positivism in the social sciences and to develop alternative “ways of knowing” (Belenky et al. 1986; Harding 1990; Stanley and Wise 1983). Critiques from women of color, Aboriginal, and lesbian feminists challenged the white biases and colonial assumptions embedded in this early work and the false assumption that there is a universal woman’s experience, leading to further feminist work on positionality, power, and voice (Kilty 2014). Contemporary feminist and other critical scholarship examines the complexities of multiple axes of power embedded within a variety of research methods (Jackson and Mazzei 2009) and the articulation of participatory methodologies in which researcher reflexivity is central (Kilty, Felices-Luna, and Fabian 2014). Our work joins these conversations by exploring how to move beyond “giving voice” to marginalized populations—a qualitative convention that maintains the authority of the academic scholar as privileged—toward a collaborative approach to knowledge production. This article, a collaboration between an academic/practitioner (Shoshana) and a formerly incarcerated woman (Tiina), aims to disrupt conventional ways of conducting and writing about research. Our focus is on explicating the process we engaged in while researching student experiences of university classes taught in a prison setting comprised of both incarcerated and non-incarcerated students, and how our work together tries to unsettle the subjectivities of the “academic knower” and the “criminalized woman.” Results from the study have been reported elsewhere (Pollack 2014), but our focus in this paper is methodological: specifically, on the process of analyzing interview data and reflecting upon the meaning of our collaborative work.

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We do not approach this article from a standpoint epistemological perspective that claims that one of us has a more accurate, legitimate, or “objective” view; rather we put our perspectives in conversation with one another in order to think through the gendered discursive complexities of experiencing incarceration. Our article is multivocal as we put in conversation our own voices, academic scholarship, lived experience, and interview data. At times we write in first person, at other times in conventional academic discourse, engaged in a conversation between and within texts and voices. We are not seeking a “place of innocence” in research about prisons and prisoners, but rather we place our attention on our process of drawing upon our respective knowledge emerging from our lived experiences, academic training, and shared feminist antiracist politics. Similar to Piché et al.’s project “to push the boundaries of what it means to ‘give voice’ in academic work and in criminological literature specifically” (2014, 450), our work explores collaborative research and scholarship between an academic researcher/educator and a researcher/student/former prisoner.

Penal Spectatorship and Hearing Voices

In *The Culture of Punishment*, Michelle Brown (2009, 21) uses the notion of “penal spectator” to refer to the individual and institutional means of looking at other people’s pain from a distance and perpetuating the ideologies and practices of punishment in the process. Penal spectatorship, according to Brown, takes many forms: theory, scientific investigation, prison tourism, media, and film, all of which have something to do with gazing at other people’s pain. She suggests that spectatorship is not only about “looking at,” but also involves authoring and authorizing penal practices. A defining feature of the spectator gaze is an experiential distance from the pain and suffering of imprisonment. Although not the focus of her book, we extend this concept to also explore the way that prison processes themselves foster (actually require) prisoners to become penal spectators of their own lives.

Walls to Bridges is the educational program that is the subject of our research. Shoshana is an instructor and Tiina was an incarcerated student; our experience of the program is that it is rich and rewarding and rife with penal spectatorship. Students from the university have myriad motivations for being drawn to this course, but it is not uncommon to hear that they want to learn from the stories of incarcerated people. They hope to learn from firsthand narratives how criminalized people navigate the criminal justice system and the factors that brought them into contact with it (that this does not in fact happen in the classes is beside the point; this is how many articulate their initial attraction to the course). Critical scholars of varying orientations—poststructural, anticolonial, feminist, queer—have illustrated the problematics inherent in the dominant group’s desire to “hear stories” or “give voice” to subjugated knowledges (Bruckert 2014; Jones 1999; Marker 2009). In a provocative piece about cross-cultural dialogue, Jones (1999) argues that marginalized people are often asked to tell their stories in ways that may be beneficial for
those who are socially privileged, but may in fact be epistemologically violent for the subaltern voices asked to share stories of oppression. Of particular relevance to our project is Jones’s observation that the dominant group’s wish for dialogue, or to hear the voices of the Other, reflects (perhaps unknowingly) the listener’s desire for a redemptive experience: “We seek liberation, through hearing you, through ‘your’ dialogue with us … and [are] therefore cleaned from the taint of colonization and the power that excludes” (1999, 314). Similar to the idea that penal spectatorship is not only about gazing upon the pain of punishment but also about authoring (from a distance) further accounts of punishment, Jones’s work illustrates that listening is also about authoring; the listener recounts narratives about both him/herself (as someone not implicated in othering processes) and the other (as someone who has suffered injustices that the listener has not). Within this configuration, there is no way out of the quandary, no redemptive place in which “voice” is given or heard, where pain and punishment are revealed and critiqued.

We see ourselves as inextricably caught up in and complicit with a web of incarceration and penalty, whether as a former prisoner or an “outside” academic. There is for us no place outside of penal spectatorship, as the complex cultural, legal, symbolic, and material strength of the (North American) prison industrial complex reaches far and wide, crisscrossing across spaces and sectors. Yet the subject and the methodology of our research are attempts to reorient the spectator gaze and to destabilize the production of academic scholarship about prisons and prisoners.

Stories about Women’s Criminality

Shoshana: I have been working in the area of women and imprisonment for 25 years, during which an explosion of feminist criminological research has undergone several iterations—from a standpoint critique of the masculinist nature of criminology, to extensive literature on how women’s pathways to crime are different from those of men, to intersectional analyses of women as both victims and offenders (Comack 2014). Despite a wealth of feminist research drawing upon the voices of criminalized and incarcerated women (and here I am including my own work in this critique), one thing remains fairly consistent: Criminalized or incarcerated women are always speaking through a researcher’s voice and are rarely provided the platform to contribute in a meaningful way to research—theoretical or methodological—about themselves. I worked as a psychotherapist in a women’s prison before I became an academic. I worked with a group of feminist psychologists and social workers to provide trauma counseling, group work, and advocacy for the women inside. These early experiences form the foundation of my commitment to shared work with criminalized women, challenging professional (correctional, psychiatric, psychological) discourses that decontextualize lived experience from social structures, and promoting continual reflexivity in practice and research.

Over the past 25 years, I have been to countless conferences, have read hundreds of articles on female offenders, and have seen endless and repetitive statistics on the
mental health, substance use, mothering, and behavioral problems of criminalized women. Yet only on the rare occasion are the subjects of all this analysis and intervention given an opportunity to represent themselves and their own perspectives on crime and punishment. Of course, there are occasional opportunities for incarcerated people to share their stories at some criminological and/or correctional conferences and workshops. Yet how these stories are shared and structured is typically shaped by the agenda of those who are putting on the event, and thus they often take the predictable shape of a reformation narrative, identifying low self-esteem, faulty thinking, and poor choices as criminogenic factors. The hegemony of this narrative frame means that alternative ways of constructing self and experience are rendered unthinkable and thus unspeakable. As a researcher and scholar, I have examined the ways in which criminological and correctional discourses obscure social context and encourage the subjectivity of women in prison as deficient and dependent (Pollack 2007, 2009, 2010, 2012). What drew me to the Walls to Bridges program was the opportunity to create spaces of critique, exploration, and relationships that allow us all—professors, prisoners, students—to move out of the boxes created for us, all this within a classroom bounded by locked doors and razor wire.

Tiina: After interacting with correctional staff in honest and authentic ways, it did not take me long to figure out the lens through which I was being (un)seen. In my early interactions with staff, I was aiming to be genuine because I knew that I could benefit from accessing real help and support. However, when written reports of these interactions were later shared with me, I saw that my honesty was used to construct me as a horrible person—a risk to society. So I quickly learned to craft my words and my interactions with staff in ways that I wanted them to be documented; I became the manipulative person they were accusing me of being. Brown (2009) writes that penal spectatorship is enacted through a variety of cultural, symbolic, and material processes that are distant from the realities of being imprisoned. However, as an incarcerated woman, I became a penal spectator of my own life. I regurgitated my story over and over and molded my life to fit the shape of the correctional discourse to explain how I was broken and a risk to society but how—by accessing prison programs and education—I was being “fixed” and it would soon be safe to return me to society. During that time, I cannot say I was really aware of how I was reproducing oppressive practices and discourses; for the most part, I actually believed that I had been broken and that prison had saved my life and given me the opportunity to change. I was sent out to do public speaking—which I believed was an amazing opportunity (I did gain skills that help in my activism today!)—and I said I was so glad I came to prison and that prison had saved my life! Now, having been free for almost two years and having had the opportunity to study and analyze the gendered scripts women prisoners are required to perform, I feel somewhat differently. I actually feel a lot of guilt and shame about being brainwashed into being a correctional puppet. I feel I contributed to the reproduction of oppression for others inside and helped to create
a need for them to have to enact the same “performances” that I did, in order to be seen as successful and low-risk inmates. I also see how my privileges gave me the advantage to adopt the correctional rhetoric that ultimately bought me my freedom, whereas others without these privileges cannot so easily do so. My white privilege and having English as my first language allowed me to easily and convincingly adopt the correctional rhetoric in narrating my story of brokenness. Additionally, the fact that I had some post-secondary education, acquired via correspondence courses and through the Wall to Bridges classes while incarcerated, proved to the correctional staff that I was a changed person. The Canadian women’s prison uses the word “empowerment” a lot (see for example Hannah-Moffat and Shaw 2000); however, I was never given the power to say I was not the problem and that I am proud that I survived violence, poverty, and addiction. My experience is one of extreme violence from a very young age continuing right up to my incarceration. This is responsible, in part, for how I was able to say that prison saved my life. Not only was I able to get clean by coming to prison, but being in prison was also the first place and time I did not fear violence on a daily basis. The reality of living with constant violence in my childhood home and on the street was the context that supported the narration of my story within the correctional framework. Now after two years of release, my personal lived experience, combined with my BA in Women’s Studies and my current college education, has enabled me to re-narrate my experiences and to develop a more nuanced understanding of the gendered discursive dynamics of incarceration.

Shoshana: When I was doing my doctoral research in the late 1990s about women’s pathways to law breaking, I contacted an advocacy group comprised of formerly incarcerated women to ask for their support in recruiting participants for my study. They responded by asking, “Why should we help you? Another white liberal feminist researcher using us to get her degree. How is your research of any benefit to us?” More recently, Australian researchers Carleton and Seagrave (2014) were posed a similar challenge. In the context of Victoria, Australia, where many women were dying post-release, Carlton and Seagrave conducted interviews with women in order to bear witness to stories of survival. After presenting their work at a conference, an audience member challenged the researchers’ outsider status by saying, “Women die on the outside every week, every day. There have been so many times when we’ve sat around in prison grieving for the latest passing ... but who are you to speak for us?” These examples speak to the power dynamics inherent in criminological research and the disjuncture between lived experience and the methodologies of academic researchers. Typically, but certainly not always, researchers with very little connection to the communities of women who have lived or worked on the streets, or been involved with substance use and criminalization, do research on them, not with them (Bruckert 2014). Although feminist researchers have attempted to mediate these problematics by conducting qualitative research that centers on the lived experiences of incarcerated or criminalized women (Balfour
and Comack 2014), there are clearly ethical and epistemological problems in regard to power, voice, and representation being raised by the communities upon which academics conduct research. Rarely do we create research studies and methodologies with criminalized women as colleagues—as creators of academic and practical knowledge about them.

**Tiina:** Although Correctional Service Canada claims to empower women in prison and treat them with dignity and respect (see http://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/women/index-eng.shtml), what has actually been empowering for me is to be treated as a research colleague as opposed to an object of analysis. I could not participate in this research or scholarship without the knowledge Shoshana brings to the project and her willingness to share it with me. At the same time, I possess knowledge of criminalization and incarceration that she could not possibly have. Sharing our respective skills and perspectives in a feminist non-hierarchical fashion and acknowledging that neither of us has better or more legitimate knowledge than the other has been empowering indeed.

Our collaborative research work reduces the us-versus-them dichotomy and I think has the potential to be a methodology for future research. Yet, I still feel that the power dynamics of research can be problematic in a lot of ways. For example, while I am someone with lived experience of the issues under investigation, I am also a researcher. How do I not exploit participants and their experiences? It is definitely a tricky area and I feel I also need to be wary of tokenism. For example, before I become involved in any project, I have to question the motivation for having me there. Am I invited because my input will be valued or am I there to lend credibility to work that will not reflect my experience? I feel I can make some very positive contributions, but there is also the danger that the reason I am being asked to be involved is to help gain access to people who have been incarcerated—to lend credibility to the project so that women feel less inclined to ask “Why should I help you?” At the same time, I am concerned that without the contributions of someone with lived experience, problematic power dynamics and spurious conclusions about criminalized women could be perpetuated.

**Disrupting the Divide: Insider/Outsider Research on Prisons and Prisoners**

Feminist criminologists doing ethnographic research, as well as other types of qualitative research, have grappled with the problematics of the (white) academic voice as authorized knower. The past few decades have produced important and groundbreaking work on women’s lived experiences of incarceration (see Comack 2014 for an overview), some of which theorize the experiences of incarceration from the perspective of imprisoned women. However, as Pollack (2014) argues elsewhere, asking women to tell their stories and give voice to their experience is not without its problems, not least of which is that the analysis, production, and dissemination of research findings are usually done without the contributions of
criminalized or incarcerated women—the academic voice remains privileged. There are, however, some encouraging developments that suggest a surge of interest in innovative research designs from various critical scholars and community-based researchers.

Convict criminology in the United States and Britain, for example, aims to disrupt the insider/outsider research binary by centering the perspectives and analyses of university scholars around the lived experience of incarceration (Earle 2014; Newbold et al. 2014). This work critiques and attempts to mediate the limitations of research that “analyzes crime from the sterile viewpoint of the middle class academic” (Newbold et al. 2014, 440) by developing theory and research about crime and punishment from the perspective of lived experience and academic training. Although not a straightforward or uncontentious process—for example, can people with lived experiences of incarceration claim epistemic privilege over the topic of prisons and punishment?—this burgeoning scholarship acknowledges that academic researchers are typically those who are granted “expert” authority over prisons and punishment.

Convict criminology has thus far not significantly engaged with community-based methodologies, nor does it incorporate much of an analysis of the raced and gendered realities of punishment. Participatory action research and community-based research have become increasingly well established in a variety of academic disciplines, and there is some evidence of its use in criminology as well. Kilty et al. (2014) offer innovative and reflexive research methodologies that unsettle conventional academic knowledge production about crime and marginalization. Additionally, we are particularly inspired by the groundbreaking research conducted by The College in Prison Research Collective at a New York state maximum security prison for women (Fine et al. 2010). This participatory action research project was conducted over a four-year period by a group of women in a New York prison—half of whom were incarcerated and half of whom were not. One of the many features that distinguishes this research from other criminological discussions about the voice of incarcerated peoples in academic scholarship is that the project was based upon relationships and had a political commitment to developing a community of researchers that valued the diverse experiences and skills of all collective members—whether university based or incarcerated. Further, their research methodology was framed by dialogue and shared learning, enabling them to jointly explore the tricky terrain of racism, homophobia, sexism, and concepts such as choice, responsibility, and accountability. Such a research model moves beyond the inclusion of incarcerated people’s voices, or the sharing of their stories, by acknowledging the myriad skills and limitations embodied by us all, and it entails a commitment to the hard work of being together as thinkers, scholars, and researchers across a wide array of differences.
The Walls to Bridges Collective: Research as Collaborative Practice

Shoshana: The Walls to Bridges Collective (W2BC) is a group of incarcerated and non-incarcerated people who meet biweekly at a federal prison for women in Canada. W2BC is an outgrowth of The Walls to Bridges program, inspired by the US-based Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. University and college instructors teach courses in correctional settings, bringing both incarcerated and non-incarcerated students together for semester-long classes. Students in the first Walls to Bridges class that I taught in 2011 decided to continue meeting after the class was completed to work together on issues related to social justice, education, and criminal justice. In 2012, they established the Walls to Bridges Collective. As the courses were gaining popularity both at the university and in the prison, we decided to conduct a research study on the student experience of taking Walls to Bridges courses. We focused on the experience of those who had taken courses through the Faculty of Social Work, where I am a professor.

The central purpose of the study was to explore how students experienced the pedagogy of the class and what they learned about diversity, privilege, community, and social justice (foci of the course material). We received approval from the university Research Ethics Board and the Research Branch of the Correctional Service of Canada, and developed a set of questions to guide interviews with former Walls to Bridges students. Five collective members—two of whom had been previously incarcerated—conducted interviews with former students. Interviews were conducted at the prison, in the community, and on Skype. The collective members had also been students of Walls to Bridges courses, so they too were eligible to participate in the study. We developed an interview method that paired together incarcerated and non-incarcerated collective members to discuss their answers to the questions. We felt that having one person interview the other would feel formal and artificial within the collective, and we wanted to honor our own belief in the value of collaborative learning and sharing. We interviewed 16 incarcerated and 21 non-incarcerated students, for a total of 37 participants.

I brought excerpts from the transcripts to the prison for our collective to code. Consistent with qualitative coding techniques that look for similarities and dissimilarities, we coded the excerpts into themes and categories and then reflected together on their possible meanings. I also co-coded interviews with collective members who conducted the interviews who were living outside. After doing an initial coding of the transcripts, we commented on each other’s codes, reflections, and observations by emailing Word documents.

This phase was followed by a more intense analysis. I coded the transcripts thematically using Nvivo qualitative data analysis software. Tiina and I then began having conversations about the possible meanings and implications of the participants’ comments. As we reflected upon the participants’ words and upon our own perspectives, emotions, thoughts, and experiences, we were also building
theory — theory that is collaborative and not bound by one person’s lens, experience, or preferred analytical framework. The conversation was textual, integrating lived experience with academic theorizing; it was holistic, iterative, and evolving. Fillmore et al. (2014) describe a similar process of data analysis in their community-based research on Canadian Aboriginal women’s drug use and treatment, conducted by a team of organizations and individuals. They use the term “crystallization” to refer to their own process of analyzing interview transcripts, which they describe in the following way:

At the center of the crystal are our team member’s diverse lenses that filter the analysis of the women’s stories through their experiences and knowledge sets. In order to organize the women’s stories, team members participated in identifying discursive themes. In all, we drew from the knowledge sets of different groups and people, including academic researchers, community members, elders, treatment workers (social workers, counsellors), storytelling participants and transcribers. (Fillmore, Dell, and Kilty 2014, 51)

Although on a much smaller scale, our process resonates with the idea of crystallization, which considers each lens and refraction as a legitimate source of knowledge reflected in the final discourses and practices of this project. We believe our intertextual conversations not only are consistent with the principles of dialogue that we follow in our collective and in Walls to Bridges classes, but also they allowed us methodologically to draw upon the expertise and lived experiences of the interviewers and helped to destabilize my position as the primary “knower” of the data.

**Tiina:** What is unique to our research is that I have had the opportunity to be a valued collaborator since the very beginning. I had no previous research experience; this is where Shoshana shared with our collective her unique knowledge, which we used to collaboratively begin this research. We formulated the interview questions and learned interview skills together, and then several of us conducted the interviews ourselves — something that for me was very meaningful. The data collection process and putting our ideas down on paper felt conversational and shared. At one point, Shoshana referred to something we were analyzing as “generating theory.” That was a surprise to me. I have not been used to having my opinions and ideas validated — in fact I learned the opposite in prison; when I said my true thoughts and feelings I usually experienced backlash and was therefore trained to only say what I thought they wanted me to say. So it was quite an empowering feeling to realize that I did contribute to the creation of academic scholarship.

**“What Do You Think This Means?”: Analyzing Transcripts**

The purpose of the study was to explore students’ experience of the W2B classes; specifically, we were interested in how students experienced the teaching method
(circle pedagogy) and what they learned about diversity, privilege, community, and social justice. We had 37 interviews, each about 1.5 hours long. Although many themes emerged from these transcripts, for the purpose of this article we focus on two examples related to spectator gaze and discourses of healing and trauma. Our first shared reading of the transcript excerpts fell broadly into the categories of “personal impact” and “ripple effect” (a category named and identified by the collective members at the prison). We found that participants frequently spoke about “voice,” “healing,” and “empowerment” when talking about how they experienced the group dynamic in the classroom. As we coded the transcripts, we shared our perspectives on these themes, with the awareness that we were not coming to the data as objective observers, but that our emotions, thoughts, and lived experiences contribute to how we hear the participants’ words.

In one interview, an incarcerated student stated:

Like even when we spoke about our lives or certain things that we went through or whatever we’re going through in here. And just to see some of them [students from outside] crying, like it touched us. And to see how connected they were to us and how they felt. It’s like they felt what we were going through. It was soothing. It was a nice feeling to be able to have that. Because in a sense, we not only connected as a university class, we also connected as women, empowering each other.

**Shoshanana:** I wonder about this. What were the tears about? Although she says it felt connected and empowering, what is really going on here? My own experience of teaching these classes is that some students from inside share their struggles of incarceration and this is a new awareness for the outside students. I know that they are often very shocked. Does this have something to do with power?

**Tiina:** These classes are the first time many people inside get to experience someone on the outside caring about them, bringing them out of isolation. When I was inside, I always believed staff worked to divide and conquer women, so the actual experience of women empowering each other made me want to emulate that within the prison and show others who had not experienced the Walls to Bridges courses how that could work.

**Tiina:** (two months later) Uh-oh, I feel very different about this now! This feels like penal spectatorship to me—I feel the student has been taught by corrections that they have to share their story. It is no one’s fault but it reproduces oppressive dynamics. Yet the incarcerated person feels rewarded by others’ tears and those who shed tears were feeling sympathy/pity for the one sharing the story. This feels icky to me now.

**Shoshana:** Oh, the pity problem: Another participant in the study talks quite strongly about how uncomfortable she was when it was clear that some of the
outside students were pitying her and the other inside students. She found it quite disempowering actually.

**Tiina:** Sometimes I put my life or prison conditions on display, even to people I know are only listening out of curiosity or fascination, just so people who have never experienced can get a small glimpse of what a terrible system we have, in the hopes they can share what I show or tell them.

We use this example not as an illustration of the students’ class experience, but to reveal how using lived experience and knowledge in conversation with one another helped us start to examine the power dynamics of “hearing voices” in the Walls to Bridges classroom, and to draw on theoretical perspectives such as penal spectatorship to deepen our understanding. We found it interesting (as has been the case with most of our analyses) that Shoshana reflected initially on the role of the outside student in this story, whereas Tiina’s gaze was directed at the inside student. Where we place our analytic emphasis is reflective of each of our own subjectivities, identities, and primary foci—Shoshana questions dynamics of power between inside and outside students, whereas Tiina’s priority is on how inside students experience prison and the role of Walls to Bridges classes within the carceral space. Our analysis of the students’ comments helped us to both reflect upon the complexities of Walls to Bridges classes and to engage in a transparent reflexivity, as is evident in how Tiina’s response to the quote shifted over time. Her initial reaction was one of identification with the inside student who experienced the tears of her outside peers as soothing. Her perspective shifted several months later after thinking about the narratives criminalized women are encouraged to produce and how others hear and respond to these narrations. We think this illustrates the common, but rarely transparent, process of doing research—the interplay between the researcher’s lived experiences, emotions, commitments, and preferred analytic framing.

We also explored the language of healing, which a number of inside students used to explain how Walls to Bridges courses increased their sense of self-worth and confidence, eroded from living in a prison setting and other damaging experiences.

The healing process [in the W2B class], just helps you realize you’re a worthy person still, that everyone makes choices in life and mistakes, but you’re still worthy as a human being. You are able to change. You are able to grow. You are able to still learn. You don’t need to give up. You’re not this lost soul that they just put away and they forget about you. You can still put your foot forward every day. This is just a stepping stone in life. That’s what I find—[the W2B class] transformed [me], it’s made me stronger and more confident in myself.

**Tiina:** It sounds like this person has done too much programming and cannot differentiate between the university class and correctional programming. It was still beneficial to her but I do not think the purpose of W2B classes is to heal because that would have to mean we are broken.
Shoshana: I feel like a few participants have alluded to the idea of healing. I wonder if it could also mean healing the damage that prison does. I am thinking about her comment, “They just put you away and they forget about you.”

Tiina: I think there is no healing from prison. You can deal with it, not heal from it. Even people who come in, such as W2B students and facilitators, come out scarred in ways they cannot heal from either. How this has really affected me is that I cannot really say to someone that prison was traumatic because the reaction will always be, “It’s prison, it’s supposed to be bad!” So how am I supposed to deal with that trauma? Especially when society is telling me I deserved it for being a bad person!

Tiina’s insistence that healing cannot happen in prison challenged us to think further about what factors contribute to this participant’s (and several others’) framing of their experience in therapeutic terms. We note that Shoshana’s comment implies a connection to the notion of healing, prompting further reflexivity about how her lived experience as a therapist in a prison may predispose her toward uncritically accepting the therapeutic language in this quote. At the same time, it raises important questions about what language is available to incarcerated women to express a sense of self-confidence, agency, or voice in a context of being “put away and forgotten about.” Further, Tiina’s final comment shifts us toward a broader discussion of the trauma of prison and the lack of discursive space available to express its damaging effects. The spectator gaze prohibits a discourse of prison as traumatic because “prison is supposed to be bad,” and these narratives are not solicited (unlike the “prison saved my life” narratives) nor given much legitimacy in the public realm.

Conclusion

We have known each other three years and our relationship as colleagues developed organically; our data analysis plan was not in the initial research design but emerged out of the collaborative work we do in our collective. Some of the design was intentional, as was the way we approached the writing and analysis in this article. This article was written through emails, comments within interview transcripts, shared writing, and coffee shop conversations about self-representation, panopticons, gaze, and collaboration. We talked through questions such as: Whose voice are we representing? What is the balance and connection between lived experience and academic theorizing? What do we do with our disagreements? How do we recognize and not deny the real material differences between us and how power is operationalized in our relationship? If penal spectatorship is at least partially defined by experiential distance from punishment regimes, then reflexivity might also involve “a framework from which to challenge our distanced selves in relation to our own place in punishment” (Brown 2009, 191). We talked a lot about complicity and redemption. Issues of lived experience and voice in research are complicated and fraught with ethical and institutional quagmires (Bruckert 2014). Even the writing...
of this paper is imbued with contradictions and complicities. Participatory models of research require openness to reflexivity, a willingness to critically examine power within research and scholarship. For academics, this means cultivating humility and entertaining the idea that academic knowing is only one way of knowing, not the way of knowing.

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we are all integral parts of colonial, racist, sexist, and exploitative systems. I think both the Inside-Out classes and the work carried out through the Walls to Bridges Collective engage directly with the issue of distance and spectatorship and grapple with the complex and uncomfortable reality of doing work about and within penal spaces with its multiple contradictions, messiness, and disruptions. Those disruptions — like the ones I have touched on in this chapter — have the potential to “rattle” subjectivities and trouble notions about who can and cannot be a “knower” and an agent of change.

Experiencing the Inside-Out Program in a Maximum-Security Prison

Monica Freitas, Bonnie McAuley & Nyki Kish

Inside-Out and Its Effect on My Imprisonment: Monica Freitas

Sitting in my cell, I reflect on the past two years of my life and the intense emotions I have experienced within the Canadian judicial system. Many women experience very low self-confidence and quite frankly do not see any way out of the crime cycle that most are accustomed to in order to survive life’s hardships. Having harmful thoughts, negative self-talk, and experiencing marginalization, oppression, and constant judgment at the hands of the people that are supposed to assist us with rehabilitation and reintegration into our communities prove to be very challenging. Due to the numerous challenges that I have been facing — having a criminal record, being away from my supports and loved ones, and experiencing extreme emotions of guilt, shame, and loneliness — my efforts and focus during my incarceration have been on obtaining higher education, advocating for and empowering female inmates, and educating our communities about the criminalization of women and its long-term effects on society as a whole. I attribute my passion and fervour for these important causes to the Inside-Out program.

Inside-Out completely changed my perspective on learning and encouraged me both through the class dialogue/activities and essays to challenge myself and others. The course facilitator and her assistant were there to encourage healthy dialogue and a positive environment, where each participant could explore their personal boundaries and perhaps challenge society’s perceptions of prisons, punishment, and incarcerated women. There was no evidence of anyone exercising power or privilege over one another, as the class had mutually and democratically agreed upon guidelines of conduct at the beginning of the program. By doing this, the facilitator empowered each person to become not only students, but teachers in their own right.

I have concluded during my time behind “the walls” that we all have a plan, whether we chose it or it was chosen for us. We cannot help who, what, and where we are, but it is what we do with our lives that differenti-
izes us from becoming oppressed, oppressors, and the liberated. I believe that education is necessary from the grassroots level in order to ensure that society creates an environment where all individuals feel respected and equal and have fair access to the basic necessities of life.

"Inside the Walls": Bonnie McAuley

My name is Bonnie and I am doing a life/twenty-five sentence for the murder of my husband. I completed year eighteen on August 22, 2013. I began my sentence at the Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario, in 1995 and at that time I also began taking courses from Queen's University by correspondence. I have three adult children and two grandchildren. I was a registered nurse outside and when I obtain this second degree I may be eligible to teach nursing in a college setting. Unfortunately, as the years have passed my chances at bursaries and outside funds for education have decreased considerably. I am now in a financial position where I'm not able to continue my education without financial help from others.

Three years ago the opportunity arose where I was able to apply for a degree course through Wilfrid Laurier University in a program referred to as Inside-Out. My hopes were increased immediately. The course would be compensated entirely by the Lyle S. Hallman Foundation, which awarded Wilfrid Laurier with a substantial amount of money. The course would be funded through Wilfrid Laurier and paid for me in its entirety. Unfortunately, I did not get into the first course. I was devastated. In December 2011, I applied to a social work course called “What is Family?” and I was accepted into the program. Since then I have applied to and completed three courses — with outstanding marks.

When I started the class in the first Inside-Out course I glanced around at the students and I have to admit that what I saw was mostly upper-class, privileged, educated females who I thought I would never fit in with. But the circle and the icebreakers helped me get to know and like each person on an equal level. They also made me realize that for the most part these women were just the same as me. The circle also enhanced our learning in the Inside-Out program. It brought university outside to the inside. These wonderful circles became “circles of trust” and it definitely removed that upper-class feeling that I had developed at the beginning. The circle also encouraged dialogue among two very different classes of students.

I am privileged enough to be starting a fourth Inside-Out course on social literature. These courses have helped increase both my self-esteem and self-confidence. I am truly blessed to be part of this wonderful program.

Jail the Body, Free the Mind: Nyki Kish

I spent two years and nearly four months imprisoned within a maximum-security unit at the Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVIW), a multi-security-level women's federal penitentiary in Ontario. In what follows I share the hurdles, rewards, and general experiences I encountered in studying at a post-secondary level from inside a maximum-security prison. I explore issues around participating in a prison educational program during Canada’s shift into a “tough on crime” penal policy, and I also attempt to express, through my own experience, how Inside-Out pedagogy and the prison environment interact, and how the two are entirely contradictory in effect.

Being Held in a Maximum-Security Prison

At the time I was introduced to the Inside-Out program, I was being held in a maximum-security wing of the Grand Valley Institution for Women for a mandatory twenty-seven-month period, a sentence stipulation anyone with a life sentence, like myself, must endure. The maximum-security unit, which the Correctional Service of Canada calls the secure unit and which everyone else refers to as “max,” is a fifteen-cell, twenty-seven-bed “supermax”-inspired wing, containing three isolated five-cell corridors where women are kept. The small, narrow, fluorescent-lit, self-contained corridors are known as “ pods.” We spent the majority of our time on the pods; we were allowed out of the unit only to ask for a maximum of one hour outside in the evenings and for visits and programs. On pod, we were locked in the cells for 14.5 hours daily. We were often double-bunked. When I first arrived, I remember clearly my first impression being: How could anyone exist for two years in such a small, unconnecting space? My second impression quickly followed: What meaningful experience could one even craft from such an existence?

All pursuits that interested me, from volunteering, to making art, to connecting to the natural world, were catarized from my life upon my being put into Grand Valley’s max, and I quickly hoped that education could be that time’s saving grace. But from a resource and opportunity standpoint, the max offers less than little. An option to privately purchase correspondence courses exists, should an imprisoned woman have access to the $500 to $800 course fees; however, a switch to online learning increasingly limits choices for the select few who can afford this option, as imprisoned people in Canada have no access to the Internet. Further, what available government assistance for post-secondary courses to inmates used to exist in Ontario was also cut from the federal budget in 2012. Indeed, post-secondary pursuits in the Grand Valley Institution’s maximum-security unit have always been
and Oppression" was the course title, and with this course began the most meaningful experience I had during my imprisonment in max.

The Inside-Out Program’s Pedagogy and Format
Inside-Out pedagogy promotes a collective, dialogue-based experiential learning. Every class takes place with university students who are both imprisoned and not imprisoned. A supportive rather than competitive tone is encouraged and equality in voice is promoted. Assigned readings are discussed, usually in one large class circle, followed by dialogue-based activities that are carried out within smaller class groups to deepen our analyses. The large circle is generally re-formed to end each class with personal reflection on the session. The opening, dispersing, regrouping ritual of the large and small circles in Inside-Out created something of a sacredness to the classes for me. Inside-Out as a whole does not follow conventional education mechanics, but presents instead as a transformative life and academic experience.

Toward the end of each course, a final project is developed by the entire class. Final projects are usually action-oriented and are often produced with themes of social justice and advocacy. By the end of the courses strong bonds tend to form between the imprisoned and outside students, both because of the starkly unconventional nature of the program that we students mutually experience, and because syllabi tend to be tailored to be relevant to issues of imprisonment (for example, the courses I participated in studied prisons, punishment, human rights, and oppression, which always gave us ample solid grounds upon which we became united and galvanized).

My Experiences with the Inside-Out Program
The courses are held in the medium-security compound of the prison, meaning that in order to attend I had to be taken off pod by guards, frisk-searched, and escorted to and from the classroom, while during class being under constant supervision of prison staff. During class I sat among all the students, both the women in this prison and as well, the outside students. In that setting and only in that setting there was no way to identify me as a maximum-security prisoner. At the time of our very first class, I had been in a max pod for eight months, and I remember feeling instantly more human than I had since being convicted. It was not long after that first Inside-Out class when I realized how compromised my social skills had become as a result of my living conditions. I was no longer, by that time, accustomed to being spoken to with respect, or having any atmosphere where my thoughts were valued or where I could express my opinions unpunished. The allow-

rare and increasingly becoming rarer. Further, they are pursuits that, by my experience, are warned against by most of the max staff because of the limitations of the unit.

There are four dated computers installed between two program rooms near the pods that are prioritized for women working through secondary school, not all of which ever steadily work. Accessing them is always a challenge. Movement in max is authorized by guard discretion in conjunction with room scheduling, and the two rooms are also used as the library, chapel, gym, court, intervention, psychology, and institutional program room, and even the women enrolled in secondary school are denied access regularly. Being able to type, research, or even work safely in a calm or quiet environment presented daily hurdles, most of which we never satisfied. As mentioned, the majority of our time was spent on pod and in cell where there are no computers, no working space, and only what study supplies we purchase through the canteen, which are limited to lined paper, pens, and erasers.

Access barriers, though significant, were not enough to stop us from wanting to pursue schooling. Beyond structural limitations, however, regular violent disruptions and emotional upheaval occurring between women and staff and among the women make the max one of the most hostile, unstable places a person could study in. In Grand Valley, the secure unit is used to hold not just people with life sentences, but also women with violent histories and women who experience varying mental illnesses and who do not function in the general population. The max offers little for us to do and is not a treatment unit to which those with mental illnesses should be surrendered. The conditions culminate to make max the perfect environment for violence. Moreover, aside from chemically restraining women, discipline and isolation are the utilized responses to any emotion or incident in max, which only perpetuate incidents and chaos on the unit, as emotional responses were, generally, our natural reactions to the intensely regulated, regimented institutional environment. Finally, because of the small size of the pods, when incidents occur, they generally shut down at least the involved pod, if not the entire unit, affecting us all. Such was the daily reality of being kept in the max. Still, as Inside-Out was being introduced into Canada and into GV1W, organizers were quite careful in pushing for the inclusion of max women, and included we were.

I completed the first four Inside-Out courses that were offered at GV1W while imprisoned in the max; it was Canada’s very first Inside-Out class that I shared as my first experience with the program. “Diversity, Marginalization,
ance of my being able to have the limited periods of free expression that came through Inside-Out ultimately became invaluable to my surviving the max, and I stress that this aspect of the program will continue to be invaluable to any imprisoned women being held in the max who engages in Inside-Out.

The supermax style of imprisonment that Canada has embraced within several aspects of the country's prison industry is, in my opinion, inherently dehumanizing. Supermax-style units are not built with anything but containment, control, and minimized maintenance in mind, and this led to atrocious effects on the hearts and minds of those of us who were subjected to exist within their walls. Very rarely did I ever get the opportunity to connect with others in any way that was not superficial or quite guarded in nature. And while no prison guards are stationed on pod with us, women in the max are watched all day through multiple cameras; as well, all of our conversations can be listened to by staff through a speaker system. What we said and did on the pods was constantly monitored, scrutinized, and used to determine our "institutional progress." Such control over ideas and casual conversation left me wary to engage at all, and I spent the majority of my first twenty months in the prison in the cells to which I was assigned. Even when I did interact with the other women on pod, because the pods only typically imprison three to five other women, the environment was always extremely isolating and socially strenuous.

Contrary to the max environment, it has consistently been my experience that there is a healing quality to the circle setting that Inside-Out embraces. In class circles there was no hierarchy and there were not the power struggles that dominated my experience with both guards and other imprisoned women in max. In class circles I felt safe to think and share and interact, and especially as our class read texts and poetry relevant to oppression, criminalization, and issues of imprisonment, I began to find something I had lost in the trauma of experiencing the penal system: my voice. Even the simplest activities that occur within the Inside-Out setting, such as reading aloud, listening and being listened to within a group of people, and being encouraged to disagree and challenge ideas, counteracted the negative impacts of imprisonment in max. Being allowed to be this way during classes reminded me of the self I developed before my imprisonment and class after class, slowly but surely, I regained confidence, vitality, and drive that I was not aware I had lost. I finished my first Inside-Out class feeling like I had found liberation from within prison walls. It has been echoed to me by other participants that such is the case for many Inside-Out students, both imprisoned and not.

Public Perception, Deservingness, and Stigma

The trend of labelling criminalized people as "undeserving" of education and other opportunities is neither new nor undocumented, and with our having access to the limited, however meaningful, post-secondary education that the Inside-Out program offers comes a great degree of carefulness and public relations management on the part of the prison administration and involved universities. While forces within both institutions vocally proclaim the program internally, frequent were our class conversations which navigated toning down, tailoring to "public perception," and properly presenting the products our classes produced through the final project of the Inside-Out course. Within CSC, almost every change that is implemented is announced to the prison population with a clause about how said change interacts with Canada's public perception of this prison system. Indeed, public perception is most often the guise under which we as an imprisoned population are denied even the most basic human rights and dignities. It is the excuse given to keep computers from being purchased and from allowing the ranges to be air-conditioned (though we endure soaring temperatures regularly), and it is the most common reason we are given when we are told what a gift it is that a few of us are able to learn. I do not dispute that under our current system, programs like Inside-Out are indeed a privilege; I dispute that they ought to be.

The acceptance on the part of imprisoned participants that we were receiving a privilege in our ability to study university courses comes about in relation to the arguments that we are imprisoned and learning while many non-imprisoned Canadians are never able to engage in university, and that the costs of these courses for imprisoned students are largely carried by the program. It is said to us that much of the public does not believe imprisoned people should have meaningful opportunity. This argument against meaningful opportunity for imprisoned people generally stands upon the logic that imprisoned people should be experiencing punishment in a setting undesirable enough and reduced enough from the average quality of existence in Canada to deter the next citizen from partaking in crime, rather than being able to develop oneself in any positive, significant manner. This logic of course rests upon the notion of individualized responsibility within a reactionary approach to the social issue of crime; it does not consider that imprisoned people might experience imprisonment as a result of lack of opportunity and marginalization. Nor does this logic consider the ripple social effects of an institution that would return educated people into communities rather than people who have only experienced trauma, isolation.
and deprivation for extended periods of time.

In this prison we often listen to mainstream media expressing supportive narratives about Canada's turn away from an alternative, non-punitive penal system toward the neo-liberal, reactionary, “tough on crime” prison industrial phenomenon that has spread globally. I have been imprisoned through the implementation of the Stephen Harper government's 2012 Omnibus Crime Bill C-10; I have experienced, since my conviction, the increasing social aggression being imposed upon the marginal and most often impoverished identities that comprise the majority of Canada's women's prison population. I have felt the devastation, and I do not use the word lightly, of existing within a cage within a society that is accepting a drastic policy overhaul of one of its dominant institutions, its prison system, without understanding the changes or their immediate or long-term effects. It has felt inexpressibly awful. We were told in the max that the public essentially wants us to suffer, that suffering is what we deserve, and that this is why max is so structurally suppressive. Even though the Inside-Out program began in Canada in the fall of 2011, just as the Conservative “tough on crime” agenda was producing its effects, the program can only ever reach a small portion of the women in this prison, even fewer of the max population. For those few of us who are eligible and allowed to participate from max, maintaining the security clearance to attend in the medium-security compound presented itself as a constant hurdle, one which I always found to be nearly too stressful to maintain.

No Security: The Constant Threat of the Max Unit's Level System
Because there is a constant surveillance of us in max, even our most menial actions and interactions are documented, assessed, and used by staff to guide decisions about how our time is spent. Decisions impact all of us — from long-term realities, such as parole, to our immediate quality of life. Most significantly, the max unit operates with every prisoner being represented by a level, in a four-level system, with level one offering the most restrictions and level four offering the most privilege. Level one prisoners may not leave the unit without being shackled and handcuffed and without being escorted by several guards. Level four prisoners can leave the unit without any handcuffs or shackles and with only one CSC staff, who does not necessarily have to be a guard (for example, a teacher or prison psychologist may escort a level four maximum-security prisoner throughout the medium-security compound). Levels are assessed weekly at staff meetings and provide the max staff an enormous, immediate, and generally arbitrary form of control over our realities. Only at level four may one participate in most programs institutionally, including Inside-Out, and throughout my participation in four separate Inside-Out courses I was not able to maintain a level four status.

I did maintain the required level four for three courses; it was during the fourth course my level four was reduced. There had been several prior occasions when staff had threatened to reduce my level. Levels could be reduced on grounds as generic as “deteriorating behaviour,” and the standard of our behaviour was determined largely by the opinions of our jailers. The jeopardy of Inside-Out always being taken from me created a permanent tension in my prison life; Inside-Out was the only meaningful activity I had access to during the two-year-plus period I was imprisoned in the max. There were countless weeks that I worried whether or not I would even be able to participate, let alone worrying about accessing the computers or having a safe space to study.

The actual course material never caused me stress, though I often found myself wishing that I was not involved in the program so that the prison would have nothing to constantly threaten me with. Still, readings and essays became my escape from prison reality; through Inside-Out I found a way to engage about issues that matter to me. I sat in many cells and read Freire and Foucault and felt in those moments connected to the world, not isolated, both physically and in ideas and beliefs. I continually regained confidence through Inside-Out courses. In hindsight, the contradiction of the confidence and social skills I was able to rebuild during class against the low self-worth, guardedness, and social anxieties I developed through time in max highlight how the living conditions of the max unit are entirely detrimental to human emotional and mental health. Being isolated, monitored, deprived of community, and constantly scrutinized and put down for so long was traumatic in a sense that I do not yet fully comprehend (it has presently been three months since I left max). I was extremely fortunate in my ability to use Inside-Out, aside from an opportunity to develop academically, as the tool with which I rebuilt and maintained some social skills and normalcy.

When I was finally pulled from completing my fourth course, although I was able to finish with a pass, I was devastated. This was the human rights course and it was unfortunately ironic that the only access to education that I had was being taken; that the staff would rather keep me on the unit and for all purposes — mentally and socially broken — than to be participating in a meaningful, productive social and academic experience. But such is the reality of the max unit. Such is the reality of the general attitude behind the
Canadian penal system. The Inside-Out program was and continues to be one of the only substantial opportunities available to women imprisoned at GVW, let alone the max, and it is only available because of the prolonged determination of outside forces. Nothing similar has been developed within the institution; the majority of the women in max sit from periods of months to periods of years with absolutely nothing to do. The majority of us are not even eligible to participate. If there is any emotion expressed by an imprisoned person in max, let alone violence (which most women in max experience), the Inside-Out program would be not more than something one or two of the women's pod-mates left to do once weekly.

**Inside-Out as a Stepping Stone**
The Inside-Out Prison Exchange program does and will continue to get nothing but support from me, but in praising it I will not let the system within which it exists be overshadowed. Long-term isolation is a difficult experience to express; I strongly urge anyone studying or interacting in the Canadian penal system to look at programs like Inside-Out as stepping stones away from the effects of isolation, and more generally as movement away from the development (or permanence) of a mass, industrialized imprisonment culture. Few know what women are sentenced to when shipped to any of Canada's maximum-security prisons, and I certainly did not foresee that such trauma could be inflicted upon me by the state, nor that a private organization could provide such a profound experience that my deterioration in max could be managed. I held onto the Inside-Out program for the majority of my imprisonment in the max as the reason and meaning by which I endured. Several peers of mine in max collapsed and became entirely institutionalized through the lack of dignity and opportunity we experienced, and many are still in max today as result. I do not doubt whatsoever that without my having had the ability to hang onto Inside-Out as I did, as a routine, as a source of hope for a potential future for myself, and as a healthy social setting, I too would have broken down long ago in that unit.

There is an abundance of literature on the benefits of imprisoned people studying, and surely as the Inside-Out program ages, bodies of literature will arise to support the effects of imprisoned people studying through the experiential form that the program provides. But the unfortunate reality is that in the majority of places where Inside-Out exists, the imprisoned people who could benefit the most deeply will not be institutionally supported to engage.

In Canada and in penal culture globally, there is increasing support for punitive systems. However a punitive system nearly broke me, and in sharing my experience I hope readers are imbued with the importance of programs like Inside-Out within these systems, if these systems must exist. The inclusion of maximum-security prisoners in the Inside-Out program was thankfully not overlooked at GVW. Let it not be overlooked anywhere as the program expands and finds roots in the Canadian prison system.