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Challenges of Co-teaching: Reflections on Social Justice Pedagogy in Prison

Vincent Russell

Western Carolina University

I arrive at the prison on time at 5:45 PM on Sunday. Class is scheduled to start in 15 minutes, and I like to get there early, to have sufficient time to go through security and set up the classroom before the students arrive. This is my third week of teaching public speaking and creative writing to the men incarcerated in Canyon Correctional Center[1], a minimum-security facility, and the security protocols have become rote. Still in my car, I take my driver's license out of my wallet and leave my wallet and cell phone in the glove box. I ensure the car windows are all the way up, and I lock the doors after I get out of the car. During perimeter checks, officers will try to break into cars left in the parking lot, and, if they succeed, they remove everything from the vehicle and leave a note telling the owner to report to the guard booth, where he or she will receive a stern warning from a corrections officer about the risks of not securing one's vehicle.

I walk across the parking lot and into the guard booth and place my ID on the desk. As the guard checks my ID and retrieves my visitor badge, I put my car keys in a small personal locker that is located on the wall. I turn around and sign the visitor manifest that is attached to a clipboard on the desk. The guard has placed my visitor badge on the desk, and I pick it up and attach it to my shirt. I then wait for Nicole, my co-teacher, who arrives 20 minutes late.

Thus begins another night of intellectual exploration at Canyon Correctional, where—for better or worse—Nicole and I struggle to work together to promote creativity, curiosity, and critiques of power among the 23 men who attend the course, many of whom desire ways to make sense of the oppressive conditions in

[1] All locations and names are pseudonyms.

which they find themselves. Locked behind these razor wire fences, we work to make education a practice of freedom (hooks, 1994), despite ongoing challenges that affect this co-teaching experience inside and outside of the prison classroom.

The United States has become an "incarceration nation" (Prison Communication, Activism, Research and Education [PCARE], 2007, p. 404), maintaining the highest rate of incarceration in the world, at 860 per 100,000 adult residents (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018). Factoring in those on probation and parole, a stunning one in 38 adults was under some form of correctional control in 2016 (Kaeble & Cowhig, 2018).

Providing educational opportunities to people in prison is one way to improve their lives and combat the prison–industrial complex, which is an "overlapping system of repression, surveillance, racism, and rapacious capitalism, with prisons and the legal system at their center" (Mayrl, 2013, p. 292). Prison education programs deserve attention because increased incarceration rates have coincided with a decline in funding for public education, many people in prison did not complete high school, and educational opportunities reduce recidivism (Bozick, et al., 2018). Educational opportunities can improve incarcerated students' literacy rates, and vocational programs provide chances for people in prison to be trained for employment when they are released from prison, thereby providing stability as they adjust to life outside the regimented protocols of prison, and a potential path out of poverty.

Critical pedagogy is one approach to prison education programs employed by practitioners and scholars (e.g., Deal & Fox, 2007; Hartnett et al., 2013; Novek & Sanford, 2007). Critical pedagogy identifies and critiques systems of power and provides opportunities for students to accomplish social change (Freire, 1970). The approach emphasizes collaborative, horizontal power relationships between students and instructors, and commitments to promoting social justice, equality, and inclusion of marginalized populations. Critical pedagogy strives to advance social justice, which is "an open-ended and literally infinite process of articulating needs and aspirations within a democratically organized social space," (Hartnett, 1998, p. 233) by prompting critical reflection. In accomplishing these goals, critical pedagogy enables "student prisoners to see the world anew and thus to build careers and lives that formerly seemed impossible" (PCARE, 2007, p. 411).

A frequent practice for critical pedagogues in prison is *co-teaching*, which is "two or more teachers working together in the same classroom sharing responsibility for the student learning" (Badiali & Titus, 2010, p. 74). Co-teaching complements critical pedagogy because both share an ethos of collaboration and horizontal power relationships between instructors and students. Much of the research conducted about co-teaching has been framed as promoting inclusion, especially of students with disabilities, as the practice emphasizes addressing individual students' learning barriers, barriers that may go unnoticed in a traditional classroom setting (Friend & Bursuck, 2012; Solis et al., 2012).

Co-teaching has been shown to improve students' social and academic outcomes, including reading ability, math achievement, grades, peer acceptance, friendship quality, self-concept, and social skills (Murawski & Swanson, 2001). Co-teaching also can be an effective means of teacher development, by providing extra support for instructors and embedding collaboration and

relationship building into teachers' experiences (Fisk & Dunbar, 2017). Co-teaching is especially relevant in prisons because incarcerated people are four times more likely to possess a cognitive disability (e.g., Down syndrome, autism, dementia, intellectual disabilities, and learning disorders) than are members of the general population (Bronson et al., 2015). Other research suggests that a significant number of people who are incarcerated are organic intellectuals, possess high school diplomas, and are prepared for college academics (Schwartz & Chaney, 2021).

Although co-teaching, potentially, is beneficial for teaching in prisons, there are few accounts of co-instructors using critical pedagogy in prisons. With some exceptions (e.g., Castro & Brawn, 2017), prison pedagogy studies have focused on educational programs, curricula, and/or students' experiences (e.g., Caulfield et al., 2016; Hartnett, 1998; Heider, 2018), rather than on instructors' experiences and/or positionalities. Furthermore, despite research on co-teaching students with disabilities, few studies have explored implications of critical co-teaching practices that advance social justice (for exceptions, see Cobb & Sharma, 2015; Sharma & Cobb, 2017). Co-teaching studies also rarely explore what happens when instructors' partnerships experience difficulties, offering, instead, best practices for co-teaching (Friend & Bursuck, 2012; Friend & Cook, 2013). Teaching in prisons is a risky endeavor, and co-teaching can further complicate issues because of the presence of multiple educators coordinating instruction. Given these heightened ethical stakes among instructors, and the students' dependence on educational experiences to secure their corporal and intellectual freedom, educators should confront the challenges of teaching in prison so that all involved can benefit from the learning experiences, thereby contributing to a more just society.

Teaching in prisons is a risky endeavor, and co-teaching can further complicate issues because of the presence of multiple educators coordinating instruction. Given these heightened ethical stakes among instructors, and the students' dependence on educational experiences to secure their corporal and intellectual freedom, educators should confront the challenges of teaching in prison so that all involved can benefit from the learning experiences, thereby contributing to a more just society.

This essay draws on my experiences co-teaching a 10-week public speaking and creative writing workshop in Colorado's Canyon Correctional Center to argue that despite the apparent complementary nature of co-teaching and critical prison pedagogy, I experienced several challenges related to the promotion of transparency about teaching practices, student agency to shape the learning experience, and critiques of power. Drawing from autoethnographic methods, I offer narratives of my time co-teaching in the prison that are informed by the embodied nature of direct experiences and personal notes that I wrote after each night of class. I begin with a brief explication of my autoethnographic methods and then provide context about the prison–industrial complex in the United States, as well as prison pedagogy to promote social justice, followed by additional discussion of co-teaching and critical pedagogy. I then provide critical analysis of my experiences with regard to challenges co-teaching in prison. I conclude by offering practical recommendations that other pedagogues working in prisons can consider before incorporating co-teaching into their praxis.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

Autoethnography is an "autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Engaging in autoethnographic analysis requires reflection on one's experiences to discern how the researcher is both a product and producer of a given cultural phenomenon (Wood & Fassett, 2003). Critical, autoethnographic inquiry involves (re)constructing lived experiences to form and share personal stories so as to make meaning of those experiences and the social conditions in which they occurred (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Furthermore, autoethnographic analysis can foster engagement with "asymmetries of power, unequal opportunities to render judgments, and maldistributions of responsibility and rewards" (Banks & Banks, 2000, p. 236) in social relations. Therefore, autoethnographic analysis offers a compelling path for exploring how I embodied and resisted varying pedagogical and cultural ideologies during my time co-teaching in prison. As such, this essay functions as a reflexive confessional tale (Van Maanen, 1988), an exploration of my difficulties, dilemmas, and failures in co-teaching for social justice in prison and an attempt to make sense of how these failures could have been avoided. Next, I discuss the significance of social justice education for prisons.

PRISONS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

> *At the 8-hour required training for prison volunteers, a correctional officer lectures about rules of engagement for interacting with what he calls "offenders": people locked away in prison. I am told that offenders possess a "criminal mind," and that I must be careful about what information I disclose to them. According to the officer, all offenders simply want to gain leverage over volunteers so that the incarcerated person can "turn out" the volunteer, which means the volunteer falls under the influence of the offender, perhaps by doing them favors or smuggling contraband into the facility. To avoid being turned out, I am told not to touch any of my students, only to call them by their surnames (not any preferred names), and that the students only should call me by my surname. The officer says that volunteers are categorized as "staff" by the state department of corrections—the same category as correctional officers—implicitly encouraging volunteers to identify with the officers rather than incarcerated men and women.*
>
> *A month later, on the first night of class, I shake hands with every incarcerated student as they enter, and I tell them they can refer to me by my first name. The students write their preferred names on placards that they place in front of them at their seat. Throughout the course, my co-teachers and I refer to the students by their preferred names, striving to acknowledge our students' humanity within a dehumanizing institution.*

As the PCARE (2007) collective of scholars argued more than 10 years ago, because of its pervasiveness and its (re)production of social inequalities based on race, class, and gender, "attending to the prison–industrial complex is both a pressing historical obligation and a research imperative for . . . scholars" (p. 404). However, the 8-hour mandatory training described

above did not discuss any of the systemic issues that can cause a person to be in prison. Instead, the correctional officer emphasized the individual choices that resulted in someone being locked away, never hinting that any of the people in prison may not belong there.

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The prison–industrial complex has roots in slavery, with some of the first police departments created to surveil and punish slaves and their sympathizers (Hartnett, 2010), and the pernicious influence of White supremacy continues today. For example, people of color are more likely to be stopped by police and imprisoned, compared to White defendants who commit the same crime (McWhorter, 2000). Among those convicted, the average prison sentence is 20% longer for Black than for White defendants convicted of the same crime (U.S. Sentencing Commission, 2017). Racial discrimination is entwined with class discrimination in the prison–industrial complex. Most people in jails have not been convicted of a crime and are detained simply because they cannot afford bail, with the median bail set at $10,000 (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). Simply being Black increases the odds of being held on bail by 25% compared to Whites, and bail amounts are 35% and 19% higher for Black men than for White and Hispanic men, respectively (Gelbach & Bushway, 2011). The effects of pretrial detention can be catastrophic, especially because defendants who cannot afford bail are more likely to have precarious living situations, and days spent in jail awaiting trial—while presumed to be innocent—can cause people to lose their jobs, drop out of drug/alcohol recovery programs, and lose custody of their children (Lowenkamp et al., 2013).

One way of helping incarcerated people forge new lives is by offering them education that takes the form of critical pedagogy, which comes from early 20th-century philosophy that, typically, is associated with the Frankfurt School of social critique, Freirean conscientization, and the work of W. E. B. DuBois (Kincheloe, 2008). Critical pedagogues view social matters as struggles about power, with particular attention to issues of social injustice, inequitable resource allocation, and other forms of systemic oppression (Castro & Brawn, 2017). Some central characteristics of critical pedagogy include commitments to promoting justice and equality via related course content and employing instructional practices that model a fairer system of rules than traditional education through establishing horizontal, rather than vertical, power relationships between students and teachers; recognition that, inherently, education is political; critical self-reflection by students about their place in oppressive systems and by teachers about whether and how their classroom practices promote inclusion and the development of conscientization; and dedication to alleviating human suffering, ideally, by engaging in social action inside and/or outside classrooms to address systemic causes of oppression and discrimination (Kincheloe, 2008). At the volunteer training, being told I should not touch the students and that I should only refer to them by their surnames contradicted these critical pedagogy commitments.

Critical pedagogy is concerned with student experience—their culture, agency, and identity formations—by taking the problems and needs of the students as the starting point of education, with their experiences (Giroux & McLaren, 1986). Educators assist students in analyzing their experiences to illuminate the processes by which they were produced or (dis)confirmed (Giroux & McLaren, 1986). To achieve these goals, critical pedagogy “attempts to organize classroom

relationships so that students can draw upon and confirm those dimensions of their own histories and experiences which are deeply rooted in the surrounding community" (Giroux & McLaren, 1986, p. 236). My goal as a critical pedagogue was to empower the students to create a more humane society.

To do this, students in critical pedagogy classrooms identify generative themes to read the word and the world (Freire, 1970). Generative themes tap into issues that are important to the students in the class, and the educator then poses problems related to these themes so that students interrogate the issues about which they care (Kincheloe, 2008). Through this process of problem-posing education, students learn to understand both the words on the page but also the unstated dominant ideologies that affect the identified issues (Freire, 1970). In a critical classroom, students engage in moral deliberation and critical reflection, developing analytical skills to liberate themselves from oppressive ideologies (Ellsworth, 1989). Instructors facilitate this process by aiding students in their recognition of injustices and empowering them to act against oppressions, while simultaneously, the instructor transforms their understanding in response to the understanding of the students (Giroux & McLaren, 1986; Shor & Freire, 1987). Critical pedagogy aims to promote a critical democracy, collective freedom, social justice, and social change, with students capable of confronting public issues through public debate and social action (Ellsworth, 1989; Giroux, 1988; Shor & Freire, 1987).

However, challenges remain for critical pedagogy in prison. The activist aims of prison educators can jeopardize educational programs in institutions when prison officials evaluate those programs as being "harmful" to the institution's reputation or too critical of societal systems of power. Indeed, at the volunteer training, few of the attendees were educators. Of the approximately 80 volunteers who attended the training that day, the overwhelming majority were affiliated with faith-based programs that provided counseling services. The second largest group was involved in health and wellness (e.g., substance abuse programs and yoga). The small number of prison teachers in attendance (not all of whom likely would identify as critical pedagogues) illustrated how unconventional my critical approach would be to prison officials. Would my participation as a volunteer only lend credibility to the prison–industrial complex? Would I be complicit in the system while effecting little to no changes among the students (Rodríguez, 2005)? I worried that my efforts would only result in reformist change to an unjust system rather than contributing to its abolition (Rodríguez, 2005).

Although teaching within prisons is rife with challenges, a pedagogical praxis that accounts for lived realities of both students and instructors, physical limitations of the educational space, and ongoing negotiations of power and ethics in the classroom provides opportunities for transformative instruction.

I worked to adopt a nuanced perspective about the contradictions and challenges that inhere in teaching directed toward liberation and freedom (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994) within the confines of an institution that restricts peoples' physical action and does its best to limit their free expression. After all, "if the aims of critical pedagogy are to ultimately free thought and action from various forms of constraint, . . . then the modern prison certainly fits within this goal" (Castro & Brawn, 2017, p. 101). Although teaching within prisons is rife with challenges, a pedagogical praxis that accounts for lived realities of both students and instructors, physical limitations of the

educational space, and ongoing negotiations of power and ethics in the classroom provides opportunities for transformative instruction (Castro & Brawn, 2017). Despite the purpose of the volunteer training curriculum to make me fear my students, I still believed implementing critical prison pedagogy with my two co-teachers (Katherine and Nicole) offered a way to foster transformative moments, and I hoped my co-teachers would share those commitments.

HOLISTIC CO-TEACHING

The program director of the educational workshop assigns Katherine, Nicole, and me to be co-instructors for the duration of our workshop at Canyon Correctional. When I meet Katherine and Nicole, they share that they finished their bachelor's degrees several years ago and that they volunteered to teach the workshop in addition to their full-time careers. Katherine is a White woman in her late 20s who has taught four times previously at Canyon Correctional. She is a social worker at a children's home in the nearby metro area. A former anarchist from the Midwest United States and a mother, Nicole is a White woman in her 30s who works as a merchandise buyer for a local liquor store and has not previously taught in prison. When I ask if either of them has any formal pedagogy education/training, they respond in the negative. However, they, similar to me—a middle-class, White, cisgender, 30-year-old male who had been teaching in postsecondary education for 5 years—volunteered to co-teach the workshop because they believe in prison abolition and criminal justice reform.

Co-teaching can be categorized using a six-dimension framework of collaborative teaching practices (Friend & Bursuck, 2012). The dimensions are: (a) mentor modeling (one teaches and one observes), (b) one teach, one assist (one teaches and the other aids specific students/groups), (c) station teaching (instructors monitor students moving through learning stations), (d) parallel teaching (co-teachers cover the same content in separate groups), (e) alternative teaching (instructors provide different content for varied learning needs), and (f) synchronous teaming (educators collaboratively teach simultaneously).

Holistic co-teaching is an approach that weds the co-teaching practices listed above to social justice pedagogy (Cobb & Sharma, 2015). Designing a co-teaching experience with emphasis on social justice issues inside and outside the classroom can raise co-instructors' critical consciousness, allowing them to develop culturally responsive pedagogy. Co-teaching also incorporates more than one teacher's viewpoint regarding teachers' roles, which increases the possibility of divergent thinking and dialogue in the classroom (Bangou & Austin, 2011), especially if co-instructors have varying demographic backgrounds. By having two or more teachers, co-teaching provides space for instructors to engage in critical dialogue about classroom experiences after each class session and to receive feedback about their teaching practices. Holistic co-teaching can benefit students' learning, teachers' learning, and curriculum development (Cobb & Sharma, 2015), but the success of holistic co-teaching for social justice requires collaborative, successful communication between co-teachers, including syllabus design, establishing a trusting relationship between instructors, and providing constructive, critical feedback to one another about teaching practices (Cobb & Sharma, 2015).

Thus, on a conceptual level, and supported by some empirical research, co-teaching and critical pedagogy appeared complementary, and I believed employing them in the prison context could advance social justice teaching. Given that prisons are totalitarian institutions of social control and oppression, holistic co-teaching, in particular, offered an opportunity to resist that silencing discourse by democratizing further the learning environment, when compared to classrooms with a single instructor. Our instructional team and the students could play with unconventional power dynamics between teachers and students, and more voices of those who were not incarcerated would be brought into the classroom to contest ideas. Additionally, Katherine, Nicole, and I could provide emotional and professional support to each other in the uniquely challenging environment of prisons by offering feedback and encouragement to each other.

However, whereas Cobb and Sharma (2015) reported only successes associated with co-teaching for social justice, my experience co-teaching in prison was dogged by challenges that were unique to the prison context and that were exacerbated by complications associated with co-teaching. In the following sections, I provide a brief background to and context for the site of instruction, and I outline two themes that recurred during my experience: conflicts over transparency and agency as well as tensions related to being "too political."

CHALLENGES OF CO-TEACHING FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN PRISON

Nestled in the Front Range of the Rocky Mountains in Colorado, Canyon Correctional is a minimum-security men's facility that holds 150 inmates. Most of those imprisoned committed low-level offenses, although some committed more serious crimes and were moved from maximum-security institutions to Canyon Correctional only after demonstrating good behavior for many years. Most of the men are approaching the end of their prison sentences, and the officer in charge of education programming told me that the facility strives to prepare inmates for transition back into the free world, by providing educational and employment opportunities that are not found in other security facilities.

On my first visit to Canyon Correctional Center, I am struck by how little the facility resembles what I expected of a prison, as there are no guard towers, nor an intimidating concrete building. Canyon Correctional was built at the turn of the 20th century and functioned originally as an armory and barracks for the U.S. National Guard. The compound is surrounded by fences with new razor wire, added only recently, a guard tells me, because residents near the prison had resisted the addition of razor wire for years, precisely because it made the facility look too similar to a prison.

Canyon Correctional consists of a compound of several low-lying buildings (no more than a story tall) that are dispersed across several acres of land. The buildings remind me of national park lodges for rangers, with stone masonry around the foundations, tan siding on the walls, and a peaked gable roof on top. Each former barracks now holds five to seven cells, and the men must walk outside

> *to go anywhere on the premises, as all the buildings are detached with no covered walkways. The open-air layout of the compound seems to be a pleasant arrangement while I'm teaching in the spring, but I imagine that the encampment will be miserable during winter months.*

Our 10-week workshop was intended to teach democratic communication skills through creative writing and public speaking. By connecting their experiences to social issues and reflecting critically on both through writing, students would become aware of how oppressive systems had affected them and how they may have internalized and acted upon those repressive ideologies. Combining this creative, critical, reflexive writing with public speaking generated opportunities for students to voice their thoughts publicly and, thereby, make arguments about their positionality and the state of the world, a central feature of critical pedagogy (Giroux & McLaren, 1986). Students did not receive any course credit for attending the workshop, but they did receive a certificate of completion at the end of the course, which could benefit them if/when they went up for parole.

Classes were held on Sunday evenings and lasted 2.5 hours. A typical class session consisted of students reading their writing assignment for the week (typically, a poem or short story) aloud, followed by discussion about what students had written. The class then read together a brief published piece, often a poem or book chapter, aloud in class that related to the theme for the night (e.g., immigration, morality, or family), followed either by discussion about the evening's theme or peer workshops to improve students' writing. At the end of class, students were given homework to complete for the next week's class, which almost always consisted of writing a poem, short story, or essay that related to the theme of that next class session.

After 4 weeks of topics that were preplanned by Katherine, Nicole, and me, the students decided what topics they wanted to discuss for the remaining 6 weeks of class. This decision contributed to one of the first challenges faced during my co-teaching experience: how much agency to grant students with regard to decision making about the curriculum.

Student Agency

Our decision to have students choose topics for the final 6 weeks of class arose from our desire to identify generative themes, reflecting critical pedagogy's commitment that education ought to speak to students' needs and interests and assist their navigation of power relations in society (Freire, 1970). On the night the class brainstormed about topics, I led students in a structured activity that intended to bring deliberative democratic communication into the authoritarian prison context. Students, even in this small exercise, could learn political deliberation through doing it, a keystone of experiential learning and critical pedagogy (Kincheloe, 2008).

First, students brainstormed topics. I facilitated the conversation as Nicole wrote students' ideas on easel paper. Students raised their hands and proposed topics such as "illegal immigration," "self-medication," "medical experiments," "freedom," "music as release," and "sports as meditation." I then distributed three stickers to each student, so they could vote for topics they wanted to discuss, but a student could not vote for the same topic more than once. Topics were

taped on the walls around the room, and as the students walked around the room placing stickers on topics, they talked about what, for instance, "medical experiments" might mean, and they discussed pros and cons of voting for "legalizing psychedelics" instead of "taking things personally."

Later, I tallied the winning topics, which, in order from highest to lowest were: "illegal immigration," "self-medication," "medical experiments," "political correctness," "morals," and "trust." "Freedom" was the only topic that received zero votes. The next week before class, I met with Katherine and Nicole to prepare for the session. I had planned to share with students the complete order of topics and vote tallies to demonstrate transparency about the process and to acknowledge students' authorship of the topics. Sharing that information was meant to communicate that students had decided the topics through a deliberative process, and that the teaching team would honor their choices.

However, Katherine and Nicole disagreed with my plan, as they did not want the full results shared in advance, in case, later, they wanted to change a selected discussion topic. I acquiesced to my co-teachers' request because Katherine had more experience teaching in the prison, and I was uncomfortable creating interpersonal conflict so early in the co-teaching relationship. Instead of providing an overview to the students of all the topics for the course, I told them at the end of each class what we would discuss the next week.

Although this episode could be interpreted as a typical negotiation of power dynamics among co-teachers, the stakes for respecting student agency in the prison context were much higher than in a typical classroom. Our varying approaches, honed in differing learning environments—Katherine's were as a social worker for children and a volunteer prison educator; Nicole's were as a mother to a young child; and mine were in a university setting with young adults—created tensions between our visions of what a just learning environment constituted in prison, demonstrating broader tensions about the role and power of educators in critical pedagogy (Ellsworth, 1989). I believed that if we wanted to resist in the classroom the authoritarian, exploitative prison system, we could have done so by modeling egalitarian, democratic processes that signaled clearly to students that we had listened to them, that they had agency, and that their collective decisions would be honored. I respected my colleagues' desire to retain control over the content of the workshop, but in the end, we did not change any of the discussion topics that the men had chosen, meaning that Katherine's and Nicole's concerns may have resulted in a missed opportunity to inject democratic values early in the workshop's tenure.

Another challenge related to students' educational agency occurred when we placed them into small groups to workshop their writing. Initially, I was skeptical of students' ability to work in the groups without instructor facilitation because, in large group discussions, students were disposed to making off-topic comments. I suggested to Katherine and Nicole that we divide students into three groups, with one of us sitting at each

As soon as the group members sit down, F.P. reaches across the table, gives Jordan a fist bump, and says he respects Jordan for being "forceful" and "honest" in his views, even if the two of them disagree about immigration issues. This moment of generosity sets the tone for a collegial and encouraging environment in the group for feedback on their poetry.

group to facilitate discussions and keep students on task. Instead, Nicole suggested that the instructors float around the room and check on groups as they worked autonomously. Offering students greater independence in the peer workshops proved to be successful in stimulating rich discussions among group members.

The topic that evening was immigration, and several White students had composed poems that expressed xenophobic sentiments about Latin American immigrants:

> *As usual, the students are sat in a rectangle, and we go around the room with each student reading their poem. Several students' poems express xenophobic sentiments about Latin Americans. Jordan's poem is the worst, though. A young White man, he channels his anger into his performance, vehemently expressing racist sentiments. The tension in the room is palpable after he finishes, and I worry a fight might occur once Jordan was placed into a small group with several Latino students to discuss his writing.*
>
> *One of the students in the group with Jordan is F.P., an older Latino man who, earlier that night, had expressed great empathy for migrants. Most of the students treat F.P. as a wise elder deserving of their respect. As soon as the group members sit down, F.P. reaches across the table, gives Jordan a fist bump, and says he respects Jordan for being "forceful" and "honest" in his views, even if the two of them disagree about immigration issues. This moment of generosity sets the tone for a collegial and encouraging environment in the group for feedback on their poetry.*

In this situation, I had been the one who wanted to restrict students' autonomy by overseeing and facilitating the conversation among group members. However, Nicole's instinct to trust the students' abilities was more successful for accomplishing the task. I wondered what else could have been improved (e.g., homework assignments and classroom discussions), if I had been more consistent in promoting student agency.

Being "Too Political"

The other ongoing challenge with co-teaching our communication workshop in prison related to the extent to which instructors and students should and would be *political*, which I understood as examining, critiquing, and preparing to act against systems of power (Kincheloe, 2008). However, Katherine and Nicole understood "political" as referring to electoral partisanship (e.g., Democrats versus Republicans). Co-teaching to promote social justice requires instructors to share similar philosophies about power inequalities and social actions in response to those inequalities (Cobb & Sharma, 2015). When teaching in prisons, however, this principle is more complex than in traditional classrooms. As mentioned previously, becoming "too political" in the eyes of prison staff could cause staff to terminate an education program. I also was concerned for the students' wellbeing. Encouraging students to become radicalized for their liberation or take other forms of social action (e.g., petitioning, organizing strikes, or organizing protests) could result in physical

and emotional harm to students if prison administrators retaliated. Being "political" in prison, thus, is risky, albeit a risk I believed we needed to take to advance social justice.

Katherine, Nicole, and I disagreed frequently about what constituted being "too political." We adhered to competing visions of how to operationalize critical pedagogy in the classroom because critical pedagogy often is confused with "feel-good" teaching that is intended to improve students' self-esteem (Kincheloe, 2008). For example, I wrote the lesson plans for every week of class, which included critical discussion questions for assigned readings. However, consistently, Katherine ignored those discussion questions and, instead, asked questions that dodged deeper issues of power which could have been addressed. For instance, in discussing "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" (King, 1963), Katherine engaged students in an interpretive analysis that identified the moral vision that King articulated by focusing on the actions of individuals as described in the letter. However, absent from the in-class analysis was any mention of racism or classism that King identified, much less how King's letter connected to ongoing systems of oppression.

An excerpt from a student's poem illustrated how the discussion failed to prompt critical reflection about power systems, reflecting the feel-good approach to critical pedagogy that Katherine adopted:

> The beautiful thing about morals and life
> Is that both can transform into meaningful light
> That grows souls like flowers in a meadow
> Where the good that we do resembles those petals

In critical pedagogy, "the power dimension must be brought to bear" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 9) in analyses and discussions of texts. Merely reading King's essay and understanding his argument were insufficient for meeting the goal of critical pedagogy to address subtle workings of racism, sexism, classism, cultural oppression, and homophobia. However, the prison context made the possibility of a discussion of these topics fraught with peril, and my unwillingness to create conflict in my co-instructor relationship with Katherine inhibited me from pushing us to take larger risks with our in-class discussions.

Varying opinions among Katherine, Nicole, and me about the extent to which our teaching should have been political manifested in other ways as well. On the first night of class, one student said that he wanted to discuss "the injustices of the poor," but we never did, because Katherine and Nicole were reluctant to examine that topic in the classroom. Later, after students selected discussion topics for the last 6 weeks of the workshop, I convinced Katherine and Nicole that the student-chosen topics of "immigration" and "political correctness" were not "too political," and that we ought to honor students' requests. Katherine and Nicole were reluctant to do so, again, because the political nature of these topics could generate conflict among students. In the end, I was willing to risk creating conflict among the students by discussing controversial topics because I believed the students, with proper facilitation, would respond well, but I was unwilling to risk creating conflict within the co-teaching relationship by encouraging Katherine and Nicole to change their pedagogical practices because I feared upsetting our partnership.

CONCLUSION

Co-teaching courses that promote social justice in the prison context appeared to be a complementary pairing given the shared emphases on collaboration and inclusion of diverse learning styles, but my experiences demonstrated that co-teaching in prisons required careful communication between students and instructors. I faced several challenges while co-teaching to promote social justice in prison, including the extent of students' autonomy regarding educational practices, and disagreements about the degree to which courses can and ought to be political. Although not all co-instructors may face these specific challenges, the prison context exacerbated inequalities among the parties, and co-teaching complicated these dynamics when Katherine, Nicole, and I disagreed about teaching philosophies and practices.

In discussing co-teaching to promote social justice, Cobb and Sharma (2015) offered several recommendations for instructors. First, instructors ought to negotiate course parameters and agree on social justice-informed learning outcomes. Second, co-teachers ought to provide one another with critical feedback, receive it in the pedagogical spirit in which it is offered, and act on it, when appropriate. Doing so can create a "communication loop" (Cobb & Sharma, p. 55) that includes "debriefing sessions, planning sessions, and conferencing about larger matters, such as the direction of the course itself" (Cobb & Sharma, p. 55). Finally, co-teachers ought to establish a trusting relationship anchored in critical feedback and demonstrating faith in one another's commitments to advancing freedom, justice, and equity.

My experiences resonated with Cobb's and Sharma's (2015) recommendations but were inflected by the context of teaching in a prison. Katherine and Nicole were program volunteers, and the program cannot be run without volunteers. Placing too many burdens (e.g., trainings, meetings, and workshops) on volunteer instructors could cause them not to volunteer, thereby limiting the program's reach and the feasibility of some of Cobb's and Sharma's (2015) recommendations. For example, due to Katherine's and Nicole's other commitments, we were unable to schedule regular debriefing and planning sessions. We often had to meet to prepare for class only 30 minutes before class started, and lesson plans frequently were created the day before class.

My experiences suggest several recommendations for instructors who plan to co-teach for social justice in prisons. First, my co-teaching arrangement required more lead time than in traditional university settings. As early as possible before the workshop/course began, our co-teaching team should have scheduled weekly meetings to debrief the prior class and to plan the next one. These meetings would have afforded opportunities to provide critical feedback about each team members' teaching practices. Making these plans in advance would have helped us make appropriate adjustments to our personal and professional schedules. Second, as early as possible, we should have discussed our beliefs about social justice and critical pedagogy, and, ideally, reached a consensus on those topics that

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would have informed our pedagogical practices. Volunteer instructors with minimal formal training may need to read introductory texts about social justice and critical pedagogy, such as Hartnett et al. (2013), hooks (1994), and Kincheloe (2008) to develop a vocabulary and perspectives regarding these important terms.

Co-teaching for social justice in prisons is a promising practice that can increase collaboration between instructors and students, promote diversity of opinion, and provide rich learning experiences for both instructors and students, but its implementation may be wrought with conflicts that can undermine the conscientization of students who are incarcerated. Although the stakes of teaching in prisons are high, educators, researchers, and activists must continue to enter prisons, with co-teaching bringing even more scholars past the guards and fences, and create pockets of resistance to the oppression of the prison–industrial complex that leads to a more just world.

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Vincent Russell, Western Carolina University, is an assistant professor and the Liberal Studies Program Coordinator in the Department of Communication at Western Carolina University, where he teaches courses on intercultural communication, interpersonal communication, and public speaking. A critical ethnographer who employs community-based research methods, his research (a) emphasizes communication activism for social justice scholarship, which involves communication scholars intervening collaboratively to aid marginalized individuals, activist groups, and community-based organizations to obtain social justice; and (b) explores deliberation practices and processes engaged in by people pursuing collective action.

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