



*Research Articles*

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## **Jail Pedagogies: Teaching and Trust in a Maximum-Security Men's Prison**

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Prison education promises to reduce recidivism and enhance prisoners' return to society, but activist pedagogies also help learners develop greater understanding of the systemic forces sustaining the prison industrial complex and increase their capacity to resist the racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination that undermine their personhood. While the often emotional literature on prison education can be poignant, activist educators benefit more from specific guidelines about the ways teachers and learners can build community together. This essay describes a neo-Freierian classroom community in a maximum-security state prison that relies both on Flores' "jail pedagogy" approach (2012), with its relationships of trust and radical acceptance, and Gaskew's "humiliation to humility" perspective (2015), with its critical Afrocentric pedagogy. It also introduces the concept of transforming power, an attitude of radical acceptance and love that offers a path to authentic reconciliation with the incarcerated.

*Keywords:* jail pedagogy, neo-Freierian, critical race pedagogy, transforming power

**I**t's funny how things work out. I am a professor of communication and a prison volunteer. To prepare for the first of these positions, I attended a rigorous graduate school, spent six years conducting research and completing a dissertation, and worked as a teaching assistant. Since then, I have spent 20 years teaching at a private university. To prepare for the second role, I did nothing but pass a criminal background check. Yet over the last 15 years, this volunteer work has deepened me as an educator, social justice activist, and human being. It has, in fact, provided a form of education far more profound than any other aspect of my training or personal development.

According to the Prison Policy Initiative (Wagner and Rabuy, 2016), more than 2.3 million people are currently incarcerated in the United States, with 1.35 million in state prisons, 211,000 in federal prisons, 34,000 in juvenile correctional facilities, 646,000 in local jails, and tens of thousands more in military prisons, immigration detention facilities, and other penal complexes. More than half the nation's overflowing prison population is Black or Hispanic; African American men are 6.5 times more likely to be in prison than White men, and 2.5 times more likely than Hispanic men (Sabol, West & Cooper, 2009). In five states, the rate of imprisonment for Blacks is *10 times* that of Whites (Nellis, 2016). Recent decades have seen growing awareness of the destructive impact of a discriminatory criminal justice system on communities of color, but with no clear path to systemic reform, mass incarceration persists. While budget cuts, modest sentencing reforms, and other efforts have slightly reduced prison populations in some states, the United States continues in its role as the world's biggest jailer.

Of the many forms of oppositional response to mass incarceration, one important strategy is the pedagogical efforts of scholars and social justice advocates who work to raise consciousness and ameliorate conditions behind the walls (PCARE, 2007). Although prison administrators tend to view prison education as a form of population control (Steurer, Linton, Nally & Lockwood, 2010), many tolerate educators for their ability to provide free educational resources and, incidentally, generate positive publicity (Corcoran, 1985). These volunteer educators lead classes in reading, writing, speaking, performance, philosophy, sociology, history, and other topics, and publish advocacy research based on their teaching experiences (Conquergood, 2002; Hartnett, 2011; Jewkes, 2012; Novek, 2013; Pompa, 2004; Shailor, 2011; Wacquant, 2001; and numerous others).

Such work adheres to the social justice sensibility outlined by Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz and Murphy (1996) who described social justice scholarship as foregrounding ethical concerns, conducting structural analyses of ethical problems, adopting an activist orientation, and seeking identification with others (p. 111). Frey et al. (1996) noted, "Social justice is not done when 'we' give our time and energy to help 'them' escape from oppression; it is done when we realize that none of us is truly free while some of us are oppressed" (p. 112).

For prison activists who aspire to eliminate oppression and draw attention to the value of individual lives caught up in an unjust system, the political becomes personal. They learn first-hand that their incarcerated students, relegated to the social death of prison, are more than the worst thing they have ever done. While these students have committed destructive and sometimes violent actions in the past, they are also valuable human beings with the potential to contribute to society in the future. These contradictory insights are a burden and a gift, highlighting the paradox of a system that imposes brutal punishment in the name of rehabilitation.

Since 2001, I have volunteered in several prisons, teaching classes, and leading nonviolence workshops, meeting hundreds of incarcerated men and women, and making a number of close connections in the process. These relationships have been important encounters for me and, I hope, for my students. Perhaps surprisingly, I have experienced some of the most profound moments of communicative connection in a maximum-security state prison for men, where I participate weekly in an adult learning community grounded in trust and dialogue.

This autoethnographic essay describes the growth of that learning community and outlines the specific learning strategies that have formed and sustained it. After situating the reality of prison education in the racial and cultural expectations of mass incarceration, the essay applies and extends Flores' (2012) concept of *jail pedagogy*, which emphasizes critical prison education, and Gaskew's (2015) *humiliation to humility perspective*, which contributes an Afrocentric perspective to social justice education. It also explores the transcendent terrain of relationship contained in the experience of *transforming power*, an attitude of fundamental acceptance that facilitates meaningful human connection even under the most unlikely conditions and offers pathways for reconciliation across profound social divisions.

While the often emotional literature on prison education can be poignant, activist educators benefit more from specific guidelines about the ways teachers and learners can build community together. The activist pedagogies described here help learners develop a greater understanding of the systemic forces sustaining the prison industrial complex and increase their capacity to resist the racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination that undermine their personhood. Through transforming power, such methods also help educators develop their effectiveness as advocates and activists for social justice.

### **The learning landscape**

Before we can consider a prison classroom's potential for uplift, we must situate it within the profound racial animus that plagues the criminal justice system overall. Omi and Winant (2007) call the United States a "comprehensively racial society" where artificially constructed racial meanings, imagined and contested by various political and economic forces, are "present to some degree in *every* identity, institution and social practice in the United States" (p. 19, italics theirs). In the nation's institutions of criminal justice, centuries of racial meaning have shaped present outcomes. Vital decisions – like which laws are enforced, or who gets punished and how severely – are based, in part, on long-standing patterns influenced by racial categorizations and predictions of behavior. The mass hyper-incarceration of people of color demonstrates what Winant (2000) calls the "political deployment of the concept of race" (p. 186), where dominant discursive racial meanings encoded in social structures support widespread practices of oppression.

Stuart Hall (2003) argued that media narratives transmit the ideologies of a culture's unexamined social consciousness, often communicating racial animus "without ever bringing into awareness the racist predicates on which the statements are grounded" (p. 20). Entman (1997) observed this in the structure of television news reports that fed racial stereotypes, "encouraging White hostility and fear of African Americans" (p. 29). Although media portrayals have diversified, the old stereotypes remain, and many news and entertainment venues continue to associate Black men with violence, portraying them as savage and aggressive, "inherently dangerous and in need of civilizing" (Ferber, 2007, p. 20). White citizens who absorb these negative racial stereotypes are more likely to lack empathy for African Americans at times of disaster (Johnson, Bushman, & Dovidio, 2008), to view Black defendants as guilty more often than White defendants (Mauer, 1999), and to call for harsher punishments for minority lawbreakers (Cook & Lane, 2009; Dixon, 2010; Holt & Major, 2010; Maruna & King, 2009; Roberts & Hough, 2005).

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This phenomenon is particularly problematic when public anxieties crest in “moral panics” that direct waves of intense antagonism at already unpopular groups of people. These groups are labeled “enemies of respectable society, and their conduct is viewed as not only harmful to innocent victims, but also threatening to the larger social order” (Welch, Price, & Yankey, 2002, p. 14). At such times, any potential firewalls between public policies and such sensationalized, culturally constructed discourses of bias collapse. Laws are passed and policies enacted that create coercive forms of control, further scapegoating the unpopular group (Langton & DuRose, 2013; Welch et al., 2002).

Many observers now see the so-called “War on Drugs” of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as a moral panic, generated by public frenzy over crack cocaine. This initiative targeted poor minority communities and led to the disproportionate mass incarceration of low-income

African Americans for drug offenses (Alexander, 2010; Porter & Wright, 2011). In this cultural environment, Rose (2002) argues, people of color came to be identified as “dangerous classes” regardless of whether any crime had occurred; their skin color “identified them as part of a population subgroup which might be deemed *more likely to be involved* in crime” (p. 197, italics mine). The *expectation* of criminality normalized racial profiling and led the public to accept the use of excessive force and harsh punishment against men of color (Welch, 2007, p. 286).

Already primed to pay attention to Black men, law enforcement is especially attentive to youth of color. Thus, although arrest rates for juveniles peaked in the late 1990s and have dropped since, African-American youth are still twice as likely to be arrested as White youth (Sentencing Project, 2014). An extensive review of research for the National Council on Crime and Delinquency found Black youth to be disproportionately represented at most stages of the juvenile justice system—they were more likely than White youth to be arrested, to be put in detention pending investigation, to be referred to juvenile or adult court, to have their cases prosecuted, to be convicted, and to receive harsher penalties than their White counterparts, “even when they have committed the same offense and have the same prior record” (Piquero, 2008, p. 65). This phenomenon has dire outcomes; adolescents who have been locked up are more likely to be incarcerated again and are far less likely to earn a high school diploma or consistently participate in the labor force in the future (Sentencing Project, 2014, p. 7). Overall, these dynamics present “long-term consequences for employment prospects, family formation, and general quality of neighborhood life that are more severe for Blacks and Hispanics than for Whites” (Piquero, p. 63).

### **Realities of prison education**

The men in my prison classroom have lived this reality for their entire lives. Even before the United States incarcerates many of its citizens – at a rate greater than any other nation – it fails them academically, precipitating the national scandal of the “school-to-prison pipeline.” A study for the National Center for Education Statistics (Greenberg, Dunleavy, & Kutner, 2007) reported

that 57 percent of prisoners had not completed high school or its equivalent at the time of incarceration. Typical of this condition was Diamond, one of my incarcerated students, who wrote of his own educational background:

Coming from an underprivileged community, I never really passed a grade in school above the sixth, though I was miraculously promoted again and again and graduated from elementary school when I barely met the attendance requirements. I dropped out of high school because I believed it was more important to be out in the streets making money. About five years later I was incarcerated, facing serious charges. Up to this point probably 95 percent of my education was based on things I'd learned to survive in the streets.

In their 2004 study, Klein, Tolbert, Burgarin, Cataldi, and Tauschek described the nation's prisoners as "the most educationally disadvantaged population in the United States" (p. 1), noting that the low academic skills and high illiteracy rates of many inmates leave them ill-equipped to function in the legal economy when they are released.

A five-year study by the US Bureau of Justice Statistics bore this out: it reported that 67.8 percent of prisoners are rearrested within three years after their release and 76.6 percent are arrested within five years, but it noted that recidivism rates decrease dramatically when prisoners participate in education programs (DuRose, Cooper & Snyder, 2014). Similarly, a study conducted by the RAND Corp. found that prisoners who participated in any type of correctional education programs had a 43 percent lower chance of returning to prison after release than those who did not (Davis et al., 2014).

Concluding that low educational attainment (along with poverty) is a key factor in the risk of incarceration and reincarceration, Western, Schiraldi, and Ziedenberg (2003) were alarmed as they tracked pervasive decreases in funding for prison education: "Not only is our use of incarceration highly concentrated among men with little schooling, but corrections systems are doing less and less to 'correct' the problem by reducing educational opportunities for the growing number of prisoners" (p. 6). The demise of the Pell grant program in the 1990s that had helped many incarcerated students earn college credits and prepare for reentry (Zoukis, 2015) left only a tiny handful of universities in the US – fewer than two dozen – providing college courses at low or no cost to inmates (Erisman & Contardo, 2005).

Decades later, although there are efforts to restore the Pell grant program in some areas, overall funding for prison education has not improved. In fact, as the overwhelming growth of inmate populations in recent decades has strained custodial facilities to the breaking point, prison education, including secondary schooling and vocational programs, has shriveled even further (Davis et al., 2014). In the majority of state prisons, a high school equivalency diploma is the only educational program that is offered. Poorly skilled students struggle to learn from shoddy, outdated books and irrelevant materials, and once they pass the GED exam, they are forced to leave the classroom to make room for others. Not surprisingly, recent studies observe that the prison experience, including prison education, does nothing to equip inmates with the "knowledge, training, and skills to support a successful return to communities" (Davis et al., 2014).

However, even if prison classes do not help incarcerated people secure employment (Klein et al., 2004), such classes still have significant value. As Germain (2014) observes, “Even though prisoners live in a place where much is beyond their control, education gives them power over their lives, and the ability to imagine what their future can entail” (p. 200). By enhancing cognitive skills like speaking, writing, reading, listening, and quantitative reasoning, classes may help prisoners benefit more from drug treatment, anger management, and other pro-social interventions that they encounter in prison settings (Steurer et al., 2010). They can also provide vital emotional support to the socially isolated (Dreisinger, 2014; Hatt-Echeverria, 2003; Maher, 2004) and build new critical consciousness of pervasive racial and economic inequalities (Gaskew, 2015).

For some students, the gradual recognition of their own intellectual capacity is exciting and empowering. As the student called Diamond noted, “Growing mentally, I’ve realized that there are degrees of intellectual growth outside of established academia that can be called personal enrichment. Whether classes are in traditional academic subjects or personal enrichment, I believe they are equally indispensable.” In sum, under the right circumstances, a prison class can facilitate opportunities for learning and self-discovery not necessarily associated with traditional basic skills or job training.

### **Jail and prison pedagogies**

But while the intellectual stimulation and personal enrichment that may be found in a prison class are valuable, the barriers to participation are high – the chief one being the prison itself. As described by Stephen Hartnett, Jennifer Wood, and Bryan McCann (2011), volunteering in prisons means:

encountering shattered children as young as 17 and resigned grandparents in their 60s; it means working with men and women representing many races and religions; it means teaching students from diverse employment and educational backgrounds; it means interacting with the mentally unstable, the politically paranoid, the chronically angry, and the religiously deluded; whether working in women’s or men’s facilities, it means building community with students who have been raped and both mentally and physically abused – and so teaching in prison takes you into a kaleidoscopic world of difference and pain (p. 336).

A maximum-security men’s prison is a particularly dismal place, an environment that stifles hope, triggers violence, and teaches cynicism, suspicion and manipulation as tactics for survival. The claustrophobic gray walls and heavy iron gates are only the physical manifestations of a cruel system that debases and brutalizes all who enter. An essay about prison conditions written by one of my incarcerated students called Sport described the magnified pain of “thousands of personalities, most of which carry emotional or psychological scars and disorders, locked in tight, overcrowded, confused spaces. Stacked on top of each other. Mistreated, screamed at, degraded, dehumanized, and stripped of all dignity through relentless, continual strip searches.”

Inside this sequestered and brutal world, the natural need for human connection is thwarted at every turn, as prisoners are cut off from family, community, and free society. Friends and loved ones rarely visit; some states have banned in-person visits entirely in favor of video exchanges, or a prison is too far away for an impoverished family to travel. On a typical day, many inmates speak only with hostile guards, indifferent staffers, and possibly, with each other, warily trying to avoid violating both institutional rules and undeclared inmate codes. These interactions are far more likely to be characterized by suspicion and threats of violence than by trust or empathy. For the most part, timed and regulated custodial movements preclude extended socializing, and when the prison is on lockdown or inmates are held in solitary confinement, even these fraught contacts cease.

Thus, prisons may be noisy and crowded, yet at the same time profoundly isolating. Here, it is all too easy for a human being to feel that his life is utterly without value or purpose. While activists seek to abolish the prison industrial complex, this goal is a distant dream for people serving long sentences. A fortunate few of these may be able to work within the legal system to get their sentences reduced, but the majority will not be so fortunate. To survive inside, then, and to hold on to their humanity under the grimmest conditions, prisoners need learning strategies that offer a sense of purpose and possibility. Educators may have expertise in their disciplines, but do we have the honesty, the compassion, and the courage to support the incarcerated in their struggles to find meaning?

In a strange paradox, however, the prison's bleak setting may provide a protected harbor where interactions take a turn toward the humane and the meaningful. Even within the most threatening structures of domination, Conquergood (1995) argues, people "carve out space for resisting, contesting, subverting authority, and refurbishing their own identity and dignity" (p. 85). A prison classroom can support this creative process by providing a social space where incarcerated students can learn in dialogue with each other and with outside volunteers, and where they may discover a communicative joy rarely encountered elsewhere in their lives. Since prisoners possess varying literacy rates, this environment would not follow traditional models of instruction, but must reflect Gilligan's ethic of care (1982), "the vision that everyone will be responded to and included (p. 63)." Such a learning community must be grounded in principles of human connection rather than in rules, performance standards, or evaluations.

In his study of educators in a California youth detention facility, Flores (2012) named the concept of *jail pedagogy*, a specifically neo-Freierian teaching commitment "to bring intellectual empowerment to individuals who have been stripped of their capital, cultures, and freedom" (p. 287). Flores characterized the practices of these educators according to three themes: compassionate efforts to build confidence in students who had become alienated by their previous experiences of schooling; the incorporation of students' life experiences, background knowledge and cultures into the curriculum; and trust-building expressions of care, sensitivity, and understanding. (Note: A number of prison educators employ similarly critical and committed pedagogical approaches to prison education, but have not named them as such. Flores' term *jail pedagogy* helps to delineate the specific ways in which such caring approaches differ from traditional control-based forms of prison education.)

Grounded in compassion and commitment to social justice, the approach of *jail pedagogy* facilitates creative self-discovery through the development of community, collaborative learning, and critical consciousness. According to Muth (2008), intentional strategies of mutual respect and cooperation generate a “third space” that allows learners to explore their own internal realities and gain confidence “that they are capable of interpreting life experiences for themselves . . . in this space, learners are no longer powerless” (p. 270). By developing a “third space” of this type, a prison class can support the development of meaningful human connection among incarcerated men who are dispossessed and shunned.

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Although Gaskew (2015) would agree with Flores that it is essential to incorporate students’ life experiences and cultures into a liberatory curriculum, he bemoans the limitations of critical pedagogy in general and prison education in particular for Black inmates. Noting that 40 percent of incarcerated people are African American, Gaskew laments that most postsecondary educators encountered by prisoners are likely to be White and may be unable to “reciprocate the learning process by engaging in an ongoing discussion about the nuances of their own socially constructed White privilege” (p. 73). He developed the *humiliation to humility perspective* (2015) specifically as a way to allow incarcerated Black men to “access the truths behind their own cultural history, the criminal justice system, and victimization, inspiring true ownership to make life choices” (p. 71).

This approach to prison education includes a pedagogical framework that identifies and opposes the politics of shaming, self-segregation, and learned helplessness that Gaskew believes people of color have absorbed from White supremacy. This method involves an appreciation of the Black experience and its history, particularly its African roots and the value of survival in the face of oppression. The *humiliation to humility perspective* also calls for a deep understanding of the economic and institutional impacts of the criminal justice system. Participants are asked to make what may be difficult choices to detach from criminal countercultures and reject the state’s grim “hospitality.” White educators can support this work not only through an Afrocentric curriculum, but also by being willing to identify and confront their own privilege in the classroom.

Teaching from these committed critical perspectives demands deep levels of empathy and care from educators. Lipari (2009) uses the term “listening otherwise” to describe the kind of understanding that enables self-transcendence and connection: “It is a sensitivity to the suffering of others that derives from regarding the other’s suffering as a concern of mine, not because I make some kind of cognitive leap of comprehending the inimitable and infinite connection among all things in the universe, or because of some strategic need I have of you, but because I feel with you, ineffably and irrevocably connected but not subsumed” (p. 54). Learning to “listen otherwise” to my incarcerated students has changed me as an activist and an educator, opening the possibility of new forms of pedagogy as relationship deepens. As I worked to support the



humanity of my students, they slowly educated me through their enthusiasm, their fears, their compassion for one another, and ultimately, their trust.

The discussion to follow will illustrate how jail pedagogy has worked in a maximum-security prison to nurture the “third space” of a learning community, despite the sometimes traumatic violence of students’ past deeds and the soul-strangling circumstances of their present confinement. It will make recommendations for the further use of jail pedagogy and critical race pedagogy to support incarcerated students as they transform and liberate themselves, to the degree that this is possible in the depths of a maximum-security prison. It will also explore the attitudinal change necessary in society to support the reconciliation of prisoners with their communities.

### **Methodological note**

To tell this story, I use the research method of autoethnography, a naturalistic approach to qualitative fieldwork. It is defined by Ellis and Bochner (2000) as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (p.741). According to Anderson (2006), autoethnography draws on a researcher’s own feelings and experiences as data to help explain the social world being studied.

Autoethnographers should illustrate analytic insights through recounting their own experiences and thoughts, as well as those of others. Furthermore, they should openly discuss changes in their beliefs and relationships over the course of fieldwork, thus vividly revealing themselves as people grappling with issues relevant to membership and participation in fluid rather than static social worlds. (p. 384).

Rather than presuming to explain a “way things really are” or a “way things really work,” autoethnography presents the interactions and experiences of the researcher as “social constructions, selected, built, and embellished by social actors (individuals) from among the situations, stimuli and events of their experience” (Lincoln & Guba, 2003, p. 227).

I agree with a number of scholars who engage autoethnography as an important tool for social justice. By defining society and self through language, writing confers power, and autoethnographers move to reassign that power more equitably through accounts that reveal the complexity of human lives through the researcher’s eyes (Wall, 2016). Savage (2003) sees autoethnography as a tool for social action that can empower individuals and change communities when it is used to “create knowledge that will increase awareness of the contradictions and distortions of our present unjust arrangements because such knowledge can also direct attention to powerful possibilities for social transformation that are equally present” (p. 336). In the case of prison autoethnographies, descriptive personal testimony from those who cross the boundaries of the free and incarcerated worlds can provide important data to be used in promoting the growth of understanding between the two.

*The origins of the class: 2007*

I had already been volunteering in prisons for six years, when in 2007, I entered the education wing of a dilapidated old maximum-security men's prison in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. As a college professor with a background in journalism, I had volunteered to teach journalism here but was asked instead to offer a once-a-week general writing class to supplement the prison's GED program. Every Friday, I would walk into the same concrete block classroom, stiflingly hot or bone-chillingly cold, to meet the same group of students for two hours to help them focus on reading and writing. Pseudonyms will be used throughout this essay to respect the privacy of the participants; students will be referred to by pseudonyms that distantly resemble their "street" names, which themselves are unrelated to their given names.

Early on, it became clear that such a program could not run like a traditional classroom. The size of the GED class, the literacy skills of the students, and the overall atmosphere in the education wing would exert pressures that caused me, like Kilgore (2017), to greatly "modify many of my techniques and teaching strategies" (p. 58), in order to perform as a prison educator. On any given Friday, the number of students fluctuated, from roughly six to 15, representing men ranging in age from about 21 to 50. Some students could read at a college level, while others struggled to make sense of a newspaper article and got bored trying after 15 minutes. It became clear that asking for volunteers to read aloud in class was the best way to share the meaning of a common text – and that the focus of these texts should be something the men found fascinating. I often thought of the legend of Scheherazade, who spun fascinating tales to stay alive; in this case, what I needed to keep alive was the students' fragile attention span.

Thus, I began bringing in articles on themes identified by the students themselves, or that I thought they might like. The most frequent topics related to criminal justice, racism, and the prison experience, but the men's tastes were wide-ranging and their curiosity about other topics also keen. Because most of the men were African American, with a small handful of White, Asian, and Latino students, I relied heavily on the work of contemporary Black social critics like Michelle Alexander, Ta-Nehisi Coates, and Bryan Stevenson, and also brought news stories, poetry, Black history, parts of Homer's *Iliad*, and essays about banking, business, nature, sports and many other topics.

These readings began to inspire deeper conversations and stronger motivation in the group; as in Flores' (2012) *jail pedagogy*, they also helped me to integrate students' life experiences, background knowledge and cultures into the curriculum. When reading together, we stopped every other page or so for discussion, whenever the material triggered a strong response. Palmer (1998) observes that truth is "an eternal conversation about things that matter, conducted with passion and discipline" (p. 104); but some topics tempted students away from turn-taking and provoked noisy debate in the service of understanding. Sometimes a discussion topic inspired by a text provoked such strong response that we didn't return to reading at all for several weeks, instead exploring the trajectories of ideas raised by the first exchange.

This style of energetic dialogue did not resonate with all students. A few, remembering their public school experiences, expected a teacher to sit behind a desk at the front of the room and tell them what they were doing wrong; they expressed disappointment that I did not dominate the

*To contribute to the change we want to see outside the walls, social justice activists need to disseminate our experiences of relationship with incarcerated people and nurture the broader societal acceptance that can be achieved through transforming power.*

discussion or “write up” the occasional unruly student. Some men eyed me suspiciously; their interactions with teachers in the past, whether volunteers or state employees, had not been friendly, and they had low expectations of an unfamiliar White woman. As the student called Bounce wrote, “Civilians working with prisoners can be indifferent and negatively judgmental toward prisoners. They can be insensitive, outright disrespectful, at times even crossing the line to treat prisoners like animals.”

Thus, in accord with Muth and Kiser’s assertion (2008) that learners are empowered by experiences of consideration and collaboration, I began to structure the class format around respectful interaction and sharing. My goal was to create an inclusive atmosphere that would support conversation and reflection, particularly about issues of social justice and personal growth. This insistence, combined with my regular presence over a number of years, helped to change the men’s expectations.

For several years, I gave homework assignments that involved writing – often opinion prompts or questions linking the week’s topic to the students’ lived experience. Rather than pointing out errors, I would read the men’s work and return it with encouraging comments and thought questions on Post-It notes. This perplexed some students whose long-ago experience of school was one of persistent criticism and failure. Another element of Flores’ (2012) *jail pedagogy* is the compassionate effort to build confidence in students alienated by their previous experiences of schooling, and I wanted the men to be able to enjoy self-expression without evaluation. Furthermore, Jacobi (2004) observes, prisoners’ writings can be “a site for tension between institutional power and resistance based in language” (p. 9), and for the men in my class, writing often provided an outlet for their frustrations with society, the criminal justice system, and the very prison in which they were housed.

One day, staff assignments were shifted and this GED class got a new state teacher, a White woman who seemed hostile to certain students. She asked to read the essays the men wrote for the class, particularly those addressing racism and systemic oppression. As the authorized teacher, she was entitled to read their homework (though the previous teacher had never done so); but she was offended by these topics and disparaged the men for the views they expressed in their essays. On several occasions her complaints led to more conflict with a student and she would write up a slip for disciplinary action against him. With writing now appropriated as a tool of institutional power over the prisoners, rather than an opportunity for self-discovery and empowerment, I stopped asking the men to write for many months; we laughed about “no homework!” The writing assignments resumed only when that teacher moved to another class the following year.

Over time, the class settled into a pattern of reading, writing and discussion that endured through rapid turnover, prison personnel changes, and other upsets. The men were hungry for exposure to ideas and events outside the daily grind of prison life, but also for social interaction. Participation in the class was stimulating to them, both for the topics studied and the opportunity for

discussion itself. A prisoner called Smooth observed that the class allowed “men like myself to share our creative side that I didn’t believe was interesting before.” The student called Youngblood wrote, “The class gives me a place where I can voice my opinion about anything and it means something, as opposed to me voicing my opinion to my homies in the big yard or the mess hall and it being shrugged off. Nowhere at no time can I get a good, strong opinionated, healthy conversation about something that matters, other than in this class.”

Flores’ (2012) third plank of jail *pedagogy* involved trust-building expressions of care, sensitivity, and understanding. At moments, the group did function this way. For example, in one session, a developmentally disabled student called Long began to read a short story he had shared with the class at least three times before. Instead of mocking him or laughing, the other men listened to the entire piece before noting the repetition and encouraging him to write something new to share instead. And once, after a rowdy session, a student called Sharif wrote a reflection encouraging me to stay with the class and not be discouraged: “She just love what she does, while being patient with us as we read and act a fool at times. How do she feel seeing us brainstorm, coming up with a list of ideas for the learning materials she brings in? Can we, will we, give you the gas you need to continue?”

But although I worked to establish and maintain Muth’s (2008) “third space” atmosphere of safety and care in every class, the shifting population posed a real challenge. Students were always coming and going. Some were forced out of the class because they had passed the GED exam successfully and the institution considered them “done;” they left reluctantly. Other students were transferred to different prisons, shipped out suddenly without warning. Still others disappeared abruptly after being sent to “lockup” for a fight or rule breach that resulted in a loss of all privileges for months. When a batch of new students would show up, some would thrive in the unanticipated ambiance of the class, first surprised and then interested. Others would stop coming after a week or two: “He said the class wasn’t what he expected,” one of the men said about his cellmate, who attended twice and then dropped out. With members changing often, discussions could be energetic and topical, but rarely personal. The atmosphere was inclusive, but not intimate.

### **A learning community blossoms: 2016**

This changed in early 2016, when the then-supervisor asked me to serve graduates of the GED program instead of current students. Six men in their mid- to late 40s became the stable core of the group, with others joining later to bring the number up to 10. All but one of the men were African American. Some were Christian, some Muslim, and some, I learned only after many months, were high-ranking members of different gangs. All of the men were serving long sentences, most for violent crimes, and most had been locked up for 20, 25 or more years – longer than their lives as free men. As the group met together over a sustained period of time, its sense of community strengthened noticeably, and the class took on progressively greater sociopolitical and ethical sensibilities. An atmosphere of trust also began to flourish, supporting personal sharing and expressions of mutual support, even tenderness.

Normally, communication in a prison is constrained by innumerable rules, both explicit and unspoken. Some of these imperatives are imposed by the authorities, while others, just as influential, are prescribed by inmate society. Information has a strange valence behind bars; it can be used as currency or a weapon, and he who talks too much in the wrong place may commit a violation he will suffer for. Thus, unless inmates were acquainted with one another in their former lives, they tend to reveal few details about themselves in casual conversation. Men who have served time together for decades may not even know one another's real names. Racial animus and mistrust add another layer of suspicion to this reticence; many inmates prefer to deal exclusively with others of their own race rather than try to cross what may prove to be dangerous boundaries. Gang and religious affiliations draw the circle even tighter, cutting men off from each other. And although some officers and staff members are people of color, the faces of punishment and control at the prison are mostly White.

So when the men walked into the class, they did not expecting to find a place they could relax with one another and with a White teacher; yet they were encouraged by the pedagogical materials they encountered. In his *humiliation to humility perspective*, Gaskew (2015) calls for a prison pedagogy informed by a deep appreciation of the Black experience and its history, particularly its African roots and the value of survival in the face of oppression. The reading list for the class had long depended on Afrocentric materials, and the new configuration of the class expanded this practice, while also delving deeply into articles about the economic and institutional impacts of the criminal justice system.

Gaskew (2015) highlights the need for White educators to be willing to identify and confront their own privilege in the classroom. The students' questions about my reasons for volunteering at the prison for so many years encouraged me to share my own perspectives on White supremacy and racial injustice openly with them. The social structures that had trapped these men for long years of their lives have emergency exits for people like me – an educated middle-class White woman and a university professor – and since all of us knew it, why not talk about it? Looking back, I think the candor we all brought to these discussions of racism and oppression was a key factor contributing to the atmosphere of trust in the classroom. Most of the men said they had never participated in frank conversations with any White person about White privilege or systemic racism before.

Flores' (2012) concept of *jail pedagogy* emphasized caring and sensitivity, and these became norms of the group. One element that helped us develop these attributes was a class practice of "check-in." Regardless of the day's readings and topics of discussion, the group adopted the practice of beginning sessions with each member in turn greeting the others by name and sharing their mood and experiences since the group's last meeting. During the sharing circle, no one was permitted to ask questions or interrupt the speaker.

Sometimes the check-in was a brief interlude before the group commenced a reading or discussion, but on other occasions, the personal details shared touched off deep emotional revelations that lasted for an entire class meeting. On one occasion, after a man's mother had died, the group spent the full two hours listening sympathetically as he described his last visit to her bedside. Like other prisoners who sometimes were permitted to make a visit to the deathbed of a close family member, he had been shackled and accompanied into the hospital room by

several corrections officers. Now the man described holding his dying mother's hands during her last moments with his wrists in handcuffs, his ankles chained. As he spoke, tears running down his cheeks, the other men nodded compassionately and listened intently.

As a result of experiences like this, a student called Bounce wrote that the class felt like "a safe haven, a sanctuary if you will, a place where you can be free (mentally at least) for two hours each week." A man called Knockout wrote that he was especially grateful not to be condemned or mocked for the vulnerability he revealed in the group. "We as prisoners need outlets to freely express ourselves. A place to share how we feel, and have our points of view reciprocated. This environment is free of judgment, ridicule or consequence. It is built like a community of sharing," he wrote.

This freedom from judgment or ridicule has been so important to the group that the student called Smooth took the trouble to develop a set of guidelines for new students who might join the class:

1. What's said in this group stays in this group
2. No judgment will be passed on anyone
3. Respectful conduct is a must, there is a lady present
4. Do not be disruptive in class (loud talking)
5. No interrupting when someone is sharing
6. If you don't feel like participating, stay silent or stay on your unit

At times, when one or two new men have shown up, Smooth has taken this list out of his folder and solemnly read them the "class rules" so they "would know how we do in here."

Despite their differences, sharing the humiliations and struggles of the prison experience creates a fellow-feeling among the men, and they are able to disclose personal and intimate feelings they have long suppressed. Nowhere is this more evident than when the men lament the difficulty of maintaining family connections – an agonizing problem for incarcerated men and women with long sentences. The student called Knockout described a phone call in which he tried to warn his daughter, grown to young adulthood in his absence, to take better care of herself, but she rejected his fatherly advice with scorn, calling him "jailbird." The man known as Close expressed his anguish when he discovered that his young son, too, had been locked up. "I was hoping for a better life for him," he said sadly. "I didn't want him to follow my example."

Other conversations touch on sensitive topics the men said they would never mention outside the classroom space. For example, in the hypermasculine environment of prison, where the inmate code demands immediate payback for actions of perceived disrespect, few men openly embrace the value of nonviolence. But when the student called Bounce got into an unpleasant dispute with another prisoner, he shared his experience in the circle, asking advice from the others and seeking affirmation for trying to avoid an outright fight. "I don't want anybody to think I'm soft, but I don't want to fight any more," he said. "But if I don't take care of it when someone disrespects me, then the wolves will come out." The others nodded empathetically, but advised restraint. The man called Scout admitted that he had been involved in a similar incident that led to a brawl, pulling many others into the fight and resulting in months of punishment and loss of

privileges for all. In the aftermath, fighting now appeared to be a young man's folly, not the best course of action for a mature man.

The class's freewheeling discussions of racism, homophobia, and religious intolerance have also broken new ground, as we considered whether parallel experiences of bigotry allow for the growth of empathy. When several men described how they felt to be despised because of their race, a fundamental element of their existence over which they had no control, I drew a connection to the virulent homophobia expressed by many prisoners, sexual orientation also being an element of identity over which people have no control. In another class, we compared the discrimination directed at Muslims since 9/11 with the anti-Semitism some prisoners expressed. Might Jews and Muslims be wounded in the same way by articulations of hatred against them? Such questions provoked much discussion. Sharif, a Muslim, commented on this discussion wryly when he wrote, "You knock the door down. You push us, you help us, you encourage us to do better. You help mature us. Yeah, you even manipulate us to do better." Another student, Diamond, found that these discussions had led him to reconsider his own prejudices. "From the things we've read and conversations held, I have begun to challenge some of my own ideas on these topics," he wrote.

*While upholding the human rights of incarcerated people, we must challenge those classes of people who perpetuate systems that cause sweeping social, political, and economic harms.*

Over time, in the give and take of diverse perspectives, in the growth of acceptance and appreciation, this weekly meeting of students and teacher has fostered deep conversation and nurtured trust. The student called Sport wrote, "Once I step into class I have no walls up. I drop them knowing that no matter what I write, it will be kept between us as a family, regardless how personal it might be. The response I receive from everyone is very sincere and from the heart." The prisoner known as Smooth wrote, "My classmates and I have developed a bond with each other that is respected amongst men and the teacher too. We are a group of men with common experiences and concerns, who provide emotional and moral support for one another." Together, the students and I have nurtured a learning community where intellectual stimulation meets emotional self-expression, where the exaggerated performances of dominant masculinity common elsewhere in the prison are minimized, and where the diverse personalities of all of the men are valued. In the circle, they feel safe to reveal their neglected emotional needs, express their opinions, share their fears, and laugh.

In these meetings, despite the harsh setting, the students and I work together to create what Palmer (1998) calls a "community of truth." This is a view of knowledge developed by a community of learners who are in relationship both to a subject and one another. It is not mediated by the teacher as "expert" (and indeed, in this society of inmates, the teacher could not be further from an expert). The community of truth is experienced by all, through the sharing of diverse interpretations and robust dialogue. "In the community of truth, knowing and teaching and learning look less like General Motors and more like a town meeting, less like a bureaucracy and more like bedlam" (Palmer, 1998, p. 101). That sounds like us.

But as prisoners say, the one thing you can depend on is change, and so it is with this class. The majority of the men in the group have been together for a year or more. But now a new supervisor has arrived in the department, bringing new policies and pressure to change the class format. This supervisor wants to see more students in the class, both coming and going: a fixed schedule where students start, finish, receive certificates, and leave the class in about 14 weeks, turning over quickly. While this may offer learning opportunities to more students overall, the community so lovingly constructed over the last year is almost certain to come to an end. In a plea to the supervisor for the class to remain as it is, a student known as Angel wrote,

It's a place where we can be transparent and vulnerable. We can show our weaknesses and be given encouragement and strength. We do a lot of writing here, and we grow as we learn more about ourselves and our craft. We do more than put pen to paper: with each day we are privileged to meet, we are one step closer to becoming the best men we can be. In my 25 plus years of being incarcerated, taking program after program, class after class, I have never encountered or experienced anything that comes close to what this class has provided for us.

### **Close encounters with the transcendent**

Civilian volunteers and prison employees are warned to be secretive about their personal lives with inmates, lest they make themselves vulnerable to exploitation; but this privacy is not reciprocal. Anyone who wants to learn about an inmate's crimes can find the details online, from news accounts of high-profile cases and from state databases that post offenders' photos, dates of birth, crimes, length of sentences and release dates. While the availability of this information may be useful for victims and their families, its broad availability underscores the permanent pariah status of incarcerated people and encourages the public to see them only as their crimes.

In the past, I avoided this online information about my incarcerated students, hoping to respect their privacy and minimize any sense of judgment. I was afraid of being afraid of them. But then a formerly incarcerated colleague criticized this willful ignorance. He observed that most people would be easy to love if we knew nothing about their wrongdoing and encountered them only in a setting where armed guards guaranteed their good behavior. Was I practicing an ethical dodge in place of genuine acceptance? he asked. Would my commitment to the men endure if I learned that they had committed particularly violent crimes – or if they were released tomorrow and moved to my neighborhood? These questions led me to recognize that knowledge of my students' past actions was an essential part of my advocacy for them.

In the midst of this conversation, I thought of one of my students, the man known as Diamond. He had shared with the group that when he was barely out of his teens, he had shot and killed another young man. Over time, he also spoke of his struggles as a homeless youth, his frustration with school, his fatherless longing for an older man's guidance and love. He described the horror he felt when he saw a police officer shoot his best friend in the head. Hearing about Diamond's experiences, I began to see him as a wounded human being, struggling for meaning in his life as I struggle in mine. Everyone in the group had done things we regretted, things that hurt others and demeaned ourselves; but all of us were more than just the worst things we had done. Over



time, the experience of teaching and learning with these men – seeing Diamond, Sharif, Bounce, Smooth and the others showing real compassion and care for one another, and for me – had transformed my prejudices and fears of these incarcerated men into acceptance and deep, if highly circumscribed, friendship.

Traditional theoretical frameworks about pedagogy don't fully illuminate relationships like this, so some scholars, like Parker Palmer (1998), find it useful to talk about classroom encounters using the discourse of spirituality, with concepts like *agápe*, compassion and forgiveness. To Palmer, the classroom is a sacred space, and the practices of “knowing, teaching and learning are grounded in sacred soil” (p. 111). The sense of connection that activist educators feel with our incarcerated students speaks to a deeper commitment, as described by Savage (2003): “The question is not who has a legitimate claim on me, but whose cry do I hear, toward whom do I move, whose interests do I serve” (p. 337).

The bonds that educators and students build inside the prison classroom demand that we see the good in our students in contexts where they are known only by their worst actions. And thus we need to speak not only of social justice, but also of reconciliation and the radical transformation of human relationships. The evolution of loving acceptance, called *transforming power*, is a philosophical perspective identified by the Alternatives to Violence Project, a volunteer organization that promotes nonviolence in prisons and communities. Aspey and Eppler (2001) describe transforming power as an attitude in which one identifies deeply with all humanity, even with people who seem threatening or dangerous. “If we reverence their potential, we can break down the barriers which prevent us and them from influencing each other. Are we willing to learn... to relate ourselves sympathetically to those of whose actions we disapprove...? Until we do this, their minds are closed to us” (p. 6). Thus the attitude of transforming power allows people to approach others with an attitude of integrity and compassion, regardless of the circumstances, and to recognize and embrace their humanity unconditionally.

This perspective is akin to the concept of *agápe*, or selfless love, described by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963), who pointed to the Judeo-Christian commandment to love one's neighbor as the “invisible, inner law which etches on [our] hearts the conviction that all men are brothers and that love is mankind's most potent weapon for personal and social transformation” (p. 28). In many faith traditions, the teaching of selfless love incorporates a deep commitment to fairness and giving that makes a point to embrace “even the unlovable and unlikable” (Craig & Ferre, 2006, p. 129). Jovanovich and Wood (2004) describe *agápe* as a worldview that embraces and loves the other, regardless of that person's qualities or even the outcome of the interaction; the focus of action is “not on what I want to achieve, but what the other needs of me” (p. 331). As in Lipari's “listening otherwise,” *agápe* nurtures compassion for the suffering of others, creating a feeling of connection that enables care and trust.

While movements to end the destructive effects of mass incarceration are called by different names, activists and scholars are increasingly framing their calls for action in terms of compassion, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Magnani and Wray (2006) argue that the national dialogue on criminal justice reform must include the concept of redemption, both to foster healing and to encourage a “fundamental change in how people within the community see one another – particularly the way they view those who are struggling or outcast, or who harm

themselves and others” (p. 157). Hartnett, Wood and McCann (2011) argue that civil society needs to apply the practices of restorative justice, creating “spaces for our criminalized neighbors to begin addressing the harm they have caused, to learn how and why to participate in civil society, and hence to begin the long journey toward full citizenship” (p. 331). The solution to the nation’s crisis of mass imprisonment begins with the understanding that incarcerated people are valuable human beings with deep connections to family and society that must be nurtured and allowed to thrive. Then can they participate in the work of helping to heal their victims, their families, their communities – and themselves.

### Conclusion

The educational approaches described here allow us to see a class in a maximum-security state prison as a locus of transforming power, where a group of prisoners balance the contradictions of prison society and the outside world in an experience of uplift. Setting aside their fiercely self-protective autonomy, they have exposed their deep need to connect to others, to experience friendship, to seek forgiveness. In this class they have expressed their own voices and felt them to be heard. They have known respect and honor in collaboration, shaping their own curriculum from ideas and events from the world outside. They have experienced supportive companionship and have given and received trust.

As described here, Flores’ (2012) neo-Freirian concept of jail pedagogy facilitates meaningful human connection. And in an environment where Black men make up the majority of the population, Gaskew’s (2015) humiliation to humility perspective advances prisoners’ resilience and behavioral change through a critical Afrocentric perspective. But Gaskew (2015) notes the limitations of these practices too; he warns that the illusion created by an egalitarian learning community will vanish into thin air when the men return to their communities. “The power imbalances created by the social constructs of racism, White supremacy, and White privilege, the same negative forces that contributed to their incarceration, and the same power imbalances that contributed to the success of their prison educators, who are carefully trying to hide this phenomenon by establishing a color-blind learning climate, will be waiting for them with open arms upon their release” (Gaskew, 2015, p. 76). The learning community described here has changed my incarcerated students and me, but it will not transform an oppressive society that relies on prisons to reinscribe inequality.

To contribute to the change we want to see outside the walls, social justice activists need to disseminate our experiences of relationship with incarcerated people and nurture the broader societal acceptance that can be achieved through transforming power. The stories we can tell have the power to transform the exaggerated fears of the public into compassion for prisoners and a well-informed understanding of the need to reincorporate them into society.

In addition, we need to advance those conversations now taking place that call into question our society’s definitions of crime and safety. While upholding the human rights of incarcerated people, we must challenge those classes of people who perpetuate systems that cause sweeping social, political, and economic harms, but who are never framed as criminals to begin with. These transformations would help to bring fairness and healing to a corrupt system that currently

imposes its harshest punishments on our most vulnerable populations. As a social justice educator, this is a transformation I work for.

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