



Research Articles

Empowering the Marginalized: The Challenges and Opportunities of Teaching Communication in a Women's Detention Facility

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Social justice can be measured by how society treats its incarcerated citizens. In a promising political shift, public opinion has begun to move away from a punitive attitude toward criminal justice to one of rehabilitation and recovery. In turn, communication scholars are uniquely equipped to contribute to the process of reconstructing just discourses related to inmate rehabilitation. This pedagogical exploration takes a narrative approach to how instructors communicatively-construct their experiences behind bars. Specifically, this article aims to better understand pedagogical immediacy through an in-depth analysis of issues within the criminal justice system. Through the perspective of six volunteer instructors, we offer a unique glimpse into the complexities that arise from teaching in incarceration settings. Our collective narratives revealed three primary themes: pedagogical paradox, connection seeking, and forward focus. These themes can inform future teaching practices that can improve social justice education.

Keywords: immediacy, detention center, communication instruction

I had submitted my J-23, passed the background check, and was now sitting in a room with fifty other people, waiting to be briefed on safety protocols and procedures. Ultimately, the list of things that we should not do was longer than the things we should. In fact, the latter list was nonexistent. We were only instructed to share as little personal information as possible: "Use either your first or last name, never both." "Don't disclose the freeway you took to get here, as that hints at where you live." "Don't tell them whether or not you have a family." "Never, ever, do them any favors. All it takes is one misstep, then they've got you hooked." The last point was

reinforced with a documentary clip, featuring the narrative of the former correctional officer. He made the mistake of helping one inmate. Little by little, the favors grew. The correctional officer was eventually blackmailed and convicted of smuggling drugs into the prison—a felony. His vulnerability cost him his career, and his freedom; he was a cautionary tale. The documentary clip ended, and I was jarred; I did not want to be that correctional officer.

Most scholars are acutely aware of the “ivory tower” phenomenon: research is conducted from a place of privilege, and the findings are infrequently disseminated past the confines of the academy, and consequently, our scholarship can seem distant and irrelevant. In an effort to remedy this scholarly limitation, a communication professor and five graduate students in September of 2016 attempted to integrate scholarly theory with pragmatic political practice by teaching communication workshops in a women’s detention and reentry facility.

We began with the assumption that communication scholars are uniquely equipped to teach inmates increased self-awareness, improved interpersonal interactions, and develop competent interview and workplace communication techniques. Focusing specifically on public speaking and interpersonal communication, our communication workshops taught inmates to manage communication apprehension, be mindful of nonverbal communication behaviors, develop more useful interpersonal and relational communication habits, resolve conflict more effectively, and be more interculturally mindful. But as a relational process, we knew that accomplishing these pedagogical objectives in an incarcerated context would require a unique level of intimacy. Teaching communication courses in jail is not the same as teaching in a traditional classroom. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of literature on exploring pedagogical immediacy in challenges environments like this. Thus, this article explores how institutional barriers to immediacy can be managed by analyzing the narratives produced by these communication workshops.

Scholarly connections

The Bureau of Justice Statistics has not addressed incarceration statistics since 2005 when they discovered one out of every 136 residents in the United States had previously or are currently in jail or prison (Harrison & Beck, 2006). Furthermore, the 2006 report confirmed America’s role as the most incarcerating country in the world. While some countries have adopted an approach of treating incarceration facilities as reformatories, some scholars argue that America approaches criminalization as a strictly punitive act (Novek, 2005). It is no secret that the United States’ criminal justice system has a reputation of being rooted in corruption, mistreatment, and recidivism. Prisons and jails are what Goffman (1961) would refer to as a *total institution*, in which routines and rules are determined by one primary institution under the same authority to control a group of people. Basic human privileges are eliminated, as large groups of incarcerated people eat, sleep, and sit in a cell alongside one another.

Recently, criminal justice officials have begun to rethink incarceration strategies after realizing the discrepancy between expectations and practices. Public opinion has recently shifted from

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understanding incarceration facilities as strictly punitive to emphasizing more rehabilitative techniques for inmate reentry. The extant literature, for instance, makes clear that inmates who are offered educational opportunities behind bars are better prepared for reentry and are less likely to reoffend (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013). Many Americans no longer expect criminals to become magically reformed while serving their sentence without offering assistance in stimulating this change (“Sentencing Attitudes,” 2006). This shift from punitive strategies to a rehabilitative approach is on display as inmates are offered classes and workshops that aim to encourage introspection and improved behavior so they can one day re-enter society as law-abiding citizens. By allowing (but not requiring) inmates to attend programs like these, the inmates assume personal

responsibility for self-improvement. Educational courses function as one vivid example of this pursuit. However, education programs have faced legislative challenges in the past. For example, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 prevented incarcerated individuals from accessing federal Pell Grants, causing many college-in-prison programs to shut down due to lack of funding (Batiuk, Lahm, McKeever, Wilcox, & Wilcox, 2005; Tewksbury & Taylor, 1996). This legislation was passed in an effort to reduce costs, even though prisoners at that time were only accessing 0.006 percent of Pell Grant federal funds (McCarty, 2006).

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of higher education opportunities within prisons and jails. In 2015, the Obama administration launched a pilot program that allowed incarcerated students to access Pell Grants for postsecondary education and training programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In California, the Public Safety and Rehabilitation Act of 2016 (Proposition 57) allowed nonviolent inmates the opportunity to reduce their sentences through rehabilitation programs, good behavior, and educational achievements (West's Ann.Cal.Const. Art. 1, § 32).

The reintegration of educational opportunities for incarcerated Americans is supported by a simple but compelling fact: education reduces recidivism. Davis et al. (2013), in a meta analysis of correctional education programs, found that inmates who participate in education classes experienced a 43 percent decline in recidivism and were 13 percent more likely to enter the workforce upon release. While there is evidence that prison education programs of all types improve rehabilitation and reintegration, academically oriented programs seem to be more useful in preventing recidivism than life skills and vocationally-focused courses (Brewster & Sharp, 2002; Cecil, Drapkin, Mackenzie, & Hickman, 2000; Gordon & Weldon, 2003; Jancic, 1998; Jenkins, Streurer, & Pendry, 1995; Jensen & Reed, 2006; MacKenzie, 2000; Wilson, Gallagher, & MacKenzie, 2000). Recent research in the UK and Australia, more specifically, found that educational programs that emphasize pro-social thinking and skills for emotional expression without violence reduced violent outbreaks within the prison as well as post-release (Farley & Pike, 2016; Pike, 2014).

The next logical step would then be to consider how the best pedagogical practices can be

employed to facilitate these obvious benefits. Given its longevity and empirical validity, pedagogical immediacy is a smart place to begin such an inquiry.

Pedagogical immediacy

The student-teacher relationship is the most significant predictor of positive learning outcomes (Hosek & Soliz, 2016). However, an affirming student-teacher relationship is not the default condition in many traditional academic environments. Instead, instructors have historically accentuated power differences, minimized personal interaction, and limited self-disclosure as a way to maintain control of the classroom (Conaway, Easton, & Schmidt, 2005). Although the rigidity has weakened over time, the psychological and social distance reflected in this traditional academic hierarchy still represents the most glaring impediment for classroom success. Fortunately, instructional communication scholars have identified a clear remedy in instructor immediacy.

Generally defined, *immediacy* refers to a set of verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors that reduce social and psychological distance (Arbaugh, 2001; Mehrabian, 1971; Myers, Zhong, & Guan, 1998). In the classroom, immediacy reflects caring, personal interest, and positive affect on the part of the instructor. Examples include nonverbal behavior, such as eye contact, movement, and body position, as well as verbal behavior, including self-disclosure, using humor, initiating positive feedback, and addressing students by name (Andersen, 1979; Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987; Gorham, 1988). Raven Wallace (2003) positioned immediacy into four categories: Social Approval - praising students and providing feedback; Status Recognition - using personal examples and allowing students to address the instructor by name; Social Interest - addressing students by name, looking at the class, touching students, asking questions of students, and soliciting student opinions; and Status Enhancement - using humor, initiating out-of-class contact, using second person plural, moving around the classroom, permitting digressions, using gestures, and varying vocal expressions (see also LaRose & Whitten, 2000).

In instructional communication research, the relationship between high instructor immediacy and positive student outcomes is among the most strongly supported findings (Witt, Wheelless, & Allen, 2004). Immediacy increases perceptions of instructor credibility, which in turn, improves the instructor's capacity to positively influence engagement in learning activities and student motivation (Trad, Katt, & Neville Miller, 2014). More directly, immediacy reduces the social and psychological distance between teachers and students that may hinder the learning process (Hosek & Soliz, 2016).

A glaring paradox is revealed here for anyone teaching in a jail or prison: many of the most effective pedagogical techniques to increase immediacy (and consequently, increase the chance of classroom success) are directly or indirectly prohibited. More specifically, as instructors at the detention center, we are told directly not to employ many of these immediacy techniques, including sharing personal examples and touching the inmates. Many of the inmates are incarcerated for identity theft; therefore, we are explicitly warned about revealing personal information about ourselves (such as our last names and places of employment) and initiating out

of class contact in any form.

These barriers to immediacy become more evident when inmates share lived experiences aloud in class; the natural inclination as an instructor is to communicate identification by sharing a story of one's own in response. But, of course, that is prohibited. As a consequence, inmates can feel dejected and discouraged from sharing personal stories in the future. As a means to alleviate such issues, the responsibility falls on instructors to find alternative methods of creating a healthy classroom environment in the midst of institutional barriers. Thus, the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: What do instructors identify as challenges to teaching inmates within a criminal detention center?

RQ2: How do instructors in detention centers navigate institutional constraints on immediacy while developing a healthy learning environment?

RQ3: What do the experiences of instructors in detention centers illuminate about the relationship between the criminal justice system and social justice opportunities?

Narrative as method

In this qualitative study, we use a narrative approach to further understand the pedagogical experiences of teaching in a women's detention center. More specifically, we, the authors reflect on our experiences teaching a communication course in a women's facility and discuss our experience through journaling, group dialogue, and reflexivity. Narrative is a powerful form of inquiry through which we can understand and make sense of the complex webs of meaning in lived experiences (Bochner, 2014; Frank, 2013). The pedagogical environment in a detention center is a paradoxical experience for instructors. The burden of strict regulations makes achieving an effective learning environment for inmates complex and, for instructors, navigating this environment can be difficult.

We found narrative to be a particularly useful method for exploring the pedagogical complexities of a detention center because it allows individuals "to make sense of expectations gone awry" (Harter, 2009, p. 141). In this specific site, traditional approaches and expectations for teaching communication are thwarted by institutional guidelines. The narratives of teachers in these facilities offer a rich site of meaning making in this complex pedagogical site, both for this team and for others who teach, or wish to teach, in detention centers.

In developing a course to teach communication skills at a women's detention center, we offered two courses per sessions, totaling 16 workshops, and had approximately 10-15 students in each class. The classes ran for 1.5 hours, once a week, for eight weeks. In each section, we taught a different skill; including managing communication apprehension, storytelling, public speaking, mindful intercultural communication, conflict resolution, and interviewing. The narratives under investigation in this study are collected from six teachers from this program, who are also the authors of this study.

All of the authors are between the ages of 23 and 36. Four are Graduate Teaching Associates,

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one has an M.A., and one has a Ph.D in Communication, all of whom work at a university. We have all taught a minimum of two eight-week sessions, four have led three sessions, and all teach this course on a volunteer basis. Although none of the authors have been incarcerated, we are driven by a common desire to affirm the humanity of each inmate living within an oppressive context and learn more about the role of power differences in communicative interactions. Helping others to improve their communication practices can emancipate those whose lives have been marked by oppression, injustice, and domination.

For the first stage of data collection, we journaled about our workshops, including observations, stories, and reflexivity. Each of the authors experienced unique challenges and victories in their teaching experiences within the women's detention center. According to Frank (2013), "Storytelling is less a work of reporting and more a process of discovery" (p. xvi). The journaling allowed us to gain a more cohesive understanding of our individual experiences. Journals were collected and we used structural analysis (LeCompte, 2000; Riessman, 2007) and axial coding (Woods, Priest, & Roberts, 2002) to uncover themes and patterns in the narratives. The second stage of data collection included a series of group meetings throughout several months to dialogue about our experiences and discuss our findings. As Harter and Bochner (2009) state, "Meaning does not reside in the mind or words of any single participant but rather emerges in the interfaces between stories, people, and contexts" (p. 142). Sharing our stories allowed us to co-construct a coherent picture of the pedagogical experience in a detention center. Through a process of journaling, sharing, and reflexivity, we were able to discover commonalities and patterns emerging as shared pedagogical experiences.

Instructors' findings

Three themes emerged in these narratives: pedagogical paradox, connection seeking, and forward-focus. We believe it is important to focus on these emergent themes as they can illuminate struggles that are encountered while teaching under institutional constraints, isolate strategies we used as a means to strengthen our relationships with the inmates and create a classroom culture, and finally, demonstrate the potential of this type of program by showcasing the positive implications of teaching incarcerated students in a jail setting. The following dialogues between instructors and incarcerated students demonstrate obstacles and successes encountered in this type of learning environment. These narratives and the resulting analysis are crucial for identifying and replicating best practices in social justice education.

Pedagogical Paradox

Prior to beginning any work at the detention center, all volunteers go through a safety orientation. In addition to providing an overview of the different correctional centers, the

orientation communicates proper protocol and conduct within the facilities. Though some directives are superficial, others are more serious. Again, we are told not to divulge personal information as many inmates are in jail as a result of identity theft. To comply with the protocol, we conceal the most basic parts of our identities. We are advised to safeguard information that could otherwise be inconsequential, and conditioned to assume malevolence. Within the detention center, divulging personal information can be risky. Of course, extensive self-monitoring is neither easy nor intuitive. Inevitably, we overshare. Luke reflects on his first experience with our students:

After [the administrator] introduced the purpose of our workshop and allowed me to say a few introductory comments, I opened by standing up and telling the whole group my (real) first and last name, where I work, my rank, and how long I had been living in San Diego. I should have just kept going and told them my social security number and credit card PIN.

Troublingly, we are taught to be suspicious of the very people we are trying to help. We are instructed not to trust inmates, with even banal details. If we choose to do so, we become liabilities. Inmates are attuned to our unease; they are not oblivious to our insecurity, and they can sense when we are withholding. Breanne recounts her discomfort:

They start coming in, and again, my instincts are in contradiction to the rules. I want to shake their hands and introduce myself, but instead, I smile, my body language communicating to keep a distance, and I introduce myself with a nickname, “B.” *Awkward*. In the orientation, we learned that some of the women were in for identity theft and we might not want to use our real names. I have never gone by “B” before and I’m pretty sure the women could pick up on my inauthenticity.

Despite our best efforts, we struggle to simultaneously be good volunteers and effective instructors. The two roles often feel at odds with one another. We yearn for connection, but we are limited in what we can say, share, and do. Even when we are mindful of what we reveal, disclosure can quickly go awry:

As an ice-breaker activity, we decide to play the get-to-know-you-game Two Truths and a Lie with the inmates. The inmates include some predictable characteristics like any undergraduate student would, but many others include examples that could be the reason they were currently in jail. One inmate includes something like “I taught kindergarten for ten years” and “My husband was a cocaine kingpin” concluding with “And I am an alcoholic.” We had to decide, based on five minutes of surface level interactions, whether the inmates *appeared* more likely to be kindergarten teachers or alcoholics. It did not go well. In future workshops, we will simply ask inmates to tell us one unique characteristic about themselves.

Activities that would typically strengthen classroom rapport can put us in uncomfortable positions. The classroom can be unpredictable, challenging our ability to be effective adult educators. We become more cautious, hesitating to take the risks that could facilitate deeper connections. This hesitancy may align with institutional norms, though it impedes our ability to imagine alternative identities. Sometimes, we are surprised when inmates share pieces of their

'outside' life in the classroom (e.g. one inmate wrote a book and sold it to a Fortune 500 company). As instructors, we fall into the trap of placing traditional societal judgment on the inmates as well. We constantly try to affirm inmates' humanity, though we also find ourselves reverting to the misconceptions, which we are trying to correct. When we are repeatedly told to consider the danger that looms, it becomes easier to forget that these women are not only inmates, they are human beings. Our dialogue with detention center staff and incarcerated students provides inconsistent depictions of social justice education--the staff encourages caution, whereas our students encourage transparency.

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Connection Seeking

In order to compensate for the constraints on immediacy, we seek connection through other means. The limitations of our instructional repertoires force us to be more creative in our approaches to each class. We know that we cannot treat our student inmates the same way as our university students--there are different hazards, offenses, and obstacles for reaching these distinct groups of students. As we try to strengthen our relationships with the inmates, we adapt our pedagogical practices. We attempt to lessen the distance between ourselves and inmates through different techniques. Instead of connecting to our students through reciprocal self disclosure as we do with our university students, we communicate our volunteer status, reliability, and shared experiences with our student inmates to foster immediacy and gain their trust.

We emphasize our status as volunteers, reiterating our purpose for being at the detention center. Higher education, rewarding though it may be, is a profession. Conversely, the detention center is an outlet. We often tell the women how much we enjoy our time with them. Undoubtedly, we benefit from teaching at the detention center. Professionally, we gain valuable classroom experience. Socially, we develop a richer understanding of our civic institutions. Culturally, we broaden our worldviews. Our work with the detention center is deeply gratifying, though we do not profit from it. We are there because we want to be. The inmates express their appreciation and repeatedly thank us every week for being there to teach them. We often note that we are unpaid so they can fully grasp how much we enjoy leading these sessions for them specifically. Each instructor may have a different reason for volunteering at the detention center, though we share a common goal. Together, we work to improve the lives of incarcerated women by teaching them communication skills. We put their interests, and realities, above our own.

Though we cannot replicate the relationships we have with our university students because of constraints on what information we can share, we can tailor our communication within the detention center to facilitate a stronger sense of identification. We do what we can to mitigate the separation between us and them; we make ourselves human. We speak of our shared experiences, relating to race, socioeconomic status, and adversity. Some of us disclosed our race and experiences with adversity so that the women know we can relate to them. Other times, drawing upon narratives of shared experience is more challenging. Despite the rigidity of rules

pertaining to names and places of employment, we are left with little guidance when it comes to deeper self-disclosures. These self-disclosures may not threaten our safety, though they are intimidating nonetheless. In those moments, we are alone in deciding which parts of ourselves to share. We cannot hope to appeal to every demographic, nor can we rely on our identity markers to substitute for connection. What we can do is show the complexity of our own identities. We can include the inmates in our own processes of sensemaking. Moreover, we can discuss the personal transformations that we have undergone. We can provide points of coherence. Breanne recounts her experience in her storytelling session:

The moments between me telling them I was going to start with an example and starting my story felt like an eternity. I didn't know whether to be authentic or follow the guidance from the teaching orientation. Then, I decide that there is no point in teaching if I can't reach them. So, I share the story of my journey dropping out and getting back into college, which included my experience being arrested. When I mention that part, I see their eyes light up. Like they could see themselves in me and have hope that they can overcome their own obstacles. I am no longer this privileged, educated person with whom they had nothing in common; I am one of them. The connection to that class, from that point on, is amazing. In writing their stories to share, they dig into parts of their past, that they haven't shared with anyone before. The camaraderie in that room changes and I feel connected to them.

We choose to share our most personal narratives; we choose to believe that the inmates will respect our vulnerability, and return in kind. Remarkably, they do. When we give them the opportunity to reciprocate, they rise to the occasion.

Another channel for bolstering connection to our student inmates was both communicating and proving our reliability as instructors. Given the institutional constraints, reliability is particularly important in communicating care, demonstrating commitment, and establishing interpersonal trust. As instructors, we agree on the importance of "sticking to our word(s)." We take our responsibilities seriously, and we never want the inmates to doubt our dedication. Though we teach in weekly rotations, a consistent schedule can be difficult to maintain because of conflicting availabilities and differences in subject matter expertise. When we are unable to fulfill our obligations, we ask the inmates how they prefer we proceed. We solicit their opinions and adjust accordingly. Stressing the co-creation of our classroom, we include inmates in our decision-making processes. We prioritize inmates' needs through our actions, demonstrating our commitment to their success in the course. Inmates cannot attend office hours, nor can they contact us with any questions or concerns. Out-of-class communication is nonexistent. Thus, the limited time instructors do have with inmates is profoundly important. We try to make the class sessions as valuable as possible, coming prepared with all necessary materials. When we receive personal requests, we make every effort to accommodate. Chelsea reflects:

I sit in my car in the parking lot before walking into the detention center, as I do every morning before teaching. Closing my eyes, I go through a mental checklist to make sure I am prepared. Phone turned off and in glove compartment? Check. Driver's license in pocket? Check. Texted my co-teachers for printed worksheets? Check. One worksheet translated into Spanish for.... No. No no no...I can't let her down again. One woman in

our class could not speak English, many of her peers could translate for her but it cut into class time and she wanted to follow the lesson on her own. There is about 15 minutes left before I needed to be in the building. Opening up Google Translate as quickly as I could manage, I furiously scribble translations for 3 out of the 4 pages. I am out of time, but at least I can show her that she matters. Now, she can follow along just like any other student. I run into the building, join my co-teachers, and am escorted to our classroom.

Demonstrating reliability is one instrumental way we strengthen our rapport with the inmates. Following through on our promises is instrumental in creating the immediate student-teacher relationships crucial for learning. We know that inmates' trust is something to be earned, rather than demanded. While the practice of being reliable is especially important in a jail setting, stability is important in our lives as instructors and human beings outside of these classrooms:

My parents never let me down, my friends and significant others rarely let me down and if they did, I always had the opportunity to accomplish what I needed to myself. I was privileged in that the people in my life I've been dependent on have been reliable and in the rare cases they weren't, I could always rely on myself. These women have been let down and have been made empty promises their whole lives and we as instructors cannot morally afford to be another broken promise in their life.

We are acutely aware that, often, inmates' lives have been marked by disappointment, duplicity, and deception. They have been neglected, let down, and set up for failure, rather than success. As instructors, we cannot risk further validating this narrative. We hear their stories of coercion, manipulation, exploitation, and know that we must provide a counterexample.

Forward-focus

Though criminal justice reform has received an increasing amount of attention, public attitudes have not entirely shifted. As we share the nature of our work, we are constantly reminded of the resistance that accompanies disruption of the status quo. Rachel recalls:

I apologize to my date, explaining that I hit traffic on the way back from the detention center.

“Why?”

I furrow my brow, confused by the question. “Why did I hit traffic?”

“No, why were you at the jail?”

“Oh, I teach there!”

He asks again, “Why?”

This time, the tone of his voice communicates shock rather than curiosity. From his general discomfort, I sense that he thinks my work at the detention center is abnormal--*weird*. To answer his question, I talk about how fulfilling it is to hear the women say they look forward to this class each week; how rewarding it is when they tell me that because of this class, they will be better mothers; how gratifying it feels to walk out of the detention center each week, knowing I am doing what I can to create a more fair and just society.

“Oh, okay” he responds.

There was no second date.

While it would be convenient to dismiss this conversation as an isolated occurrence, we cannot ignore the scope of the discourse in need of reinvention. That task can feel daunting at times. In those moments, it is helpful to reflect on the importance of this work. We know that our course provides inmates with different benefits, some more worthwhile than others. On the most superficial level, our course offers inmates proof of their participation in an educational program. Inmates receive a certification upon completion of the course, a reward for their sustained commitment. Breanne reflects on its symbolism:

As educators concerned with social justice, we have a responsibility to use our skill set to help emancipate those whose lives have been marked by oppression, injustice, and domination.

We have the opportunity to provide these women with tangible certificates that they can proudly carry out the door with them as a representation of the internal learning, self-reflexivity, and communication skill development that occurred over the eight weeks of our course. The women are so excited to receive their certificates and often bring them up and remind us of their eagerness. They will display their homework and comment on how they were thinking about their certificates and how excited they will be to reflect on all the work they put in to earn said certificates.

The final class is always bittersweet. During that session, we often see inmates at their most pivotal moments. We see the sense of accomplishment, but we know that gold-foiled certificates will not solve the issues deeply embedded within our criminal justice system. Rather, positive social change will happen when we empower inmates with the skills they need to become better neighbors, coworkers, friends, and family members. There is a reason to believe we are doing that much:

For this class session, I wanted to reiterate the importance of our personal relationships, so I asked, “Why do you think it’s important to learn interpersonal skills? Why are relationships important?”

There were several great answers, but then one woman raised her hand to speak. She had been diagnosed with a type of cancer while she was in jail and removed from her family.

“Well,” she said hesitantly, “this class has changed my life. Before I would have never talked about my illness. I would have just kept it in and tried to handle it myself. But now, I feel like I have all this support. Like, I can talk to any of these ladies, and I do.” With tears in her eyes, she hugs the woman next to her. “I feel like I’m not alone, and like, I can beat this cancer. I have hope and I have people who care about me, and having all this support makes me feel stronger. That’s something I never let happen before.”

Amidst a deeply personal crisis, this inmate felt comfortable accepting her peers’ support. She

allowed herself to be vulnerable, thereby empowering others to do the same. Our course offers material benefits, though perhaps its most meaningful contribution is its influence on inmates' ability to open up and begin trusting the people around them. It is moments like these that keep us as instructors coming back to teach in this challenging but rewarding setting.

Discussion and Conclusion

This pedagogical exploration takes a narrative approach to how instructors communicatively-construct their experiences teaching in jail. Through the perspective of six volunteer instructors, we offer a unique glimpse into the complexities that can arise from teaching in incarceration settings. Our collective narratives revealed three primary themes: pedagogical paradox, connection seeking, and forward-focus. In the following discussion section we explore the implications of these three communicative dimensions with the goal of providing future scholars, educators, and citizens with strategies for how to effectively establish instructor-inmate immediacy in the midst of institutional constraints. Further, we provide theoretical and practical implications, address research limitations, and offer future direction for scholars interested in further exploring this topic.

Generally, we find that instructors in detention centers face a number of constraints that influence their ability to teach effectively. Most notably, the institutional constraints on immediacy impede the ability to connect with the inmates. In striving to develop meaningful relationships, we are constantly reminded of the distance between the inmates and ourselves. The constraints are complex because what we experience as a way to establish a connection with the inmates, the institution views as a safety liability. There are larger implications for this tension between authentic instruction and instructor safety. We hope our narratives may be of assistance to adult educators who face similar obstacles. As we seek social justice for these inmates through provision of quality education and sincere interactions with instructors, we attempt to lessen the constraints to allow for greater support, connection, and instruction for inmates.

We draw upon narratives of shared experiences, attempting to express identification. Seeking further connection, we communicate reliability through both our words and actions. As social justice scholars and activists, we remain cognizant of our privileged position within such vulnerable, protected populations, particularly for those of us who gain access directly to interacting with inmates. We recognize how our pasts have influenced our willingness to be vulnerable, knowing that not all inmates have been afforded the same experiences. Accordingly, we strive to provide them with that support. As instructors, we acknowledge our place of privilege when it comes to stability, and we understand that our privilege creates a moral obligation to provide stability to our students. This obligation, though important, has yet to be realized by the entirety of our society. Throughout our daily lives, we try to combat the negative stereotypes that inmates will inevitably confront when attempting to reintegrate into society upon their release. We try to affirm inmates' humanity and encourage others to do the same. Our identities are constantly reshaped by our interactions with inmates, making this an incredibly rewarding instructional opportunity. Simultaneously, we observe the gratification that inmates feel upon completion of the course.

Theoretically, we hope to contribute to emergent scholarly conversations pertaining to adult education and mass incarceration. In contributing to this ongoing dialogue, we further conversations about the roles and responsibilities of teachers, scholars, and public servants situated within multiple communities. Social justice scholars within the communication discipline should feel encouraged by the progress in education that is occurring behind bars, but beware of the tensions that will arise surrounding disclosure and immediacy.

Practically, we suggest best practices for overcoming immediacy and disclosure obstacles in a non-traditional classroom. Perhaps more significantly, we offer guidance to adult educators keen on starting a similar program in their local prisons and jails, students wanting to know more about a potential creative outlet for their scholarship, and social justice activists interested in contributing to positive change outside the walls of academia.

To be sure, our manuscript is not without limitations. Our narratives reveal the challenges and opportunities of teaching in a detention center, though we are missing the perspectives of inmates. Future research may integrate the narratives of inmates, thereby expanding our understandings of the complexities of this particular learning environment.

As educators concerned with social justice, we have a responsibility to use our skill set to help emancipate those whose lives have been marked by oppression, injustice, and domination. Through involvement in prison education, we have the opportunity to improve the lives of incarcerated women by teaching them essential skills. These skills inherently benefit the inmates that take our course, though they also further the development of our society. As social justice can often be measured by how a society treats its incarcerated citizens, we must advance the attitudinal shift away from punishment, and towards rehabilitation. More importantly, we must apply our knowledge and expertise to empower marginalized populations.

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