

## Learning from Each Other: Reflections on Teaching in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

By Elizabeth Bradshaw

Associate Professor of Sociology, Central Michigan University

Email: [brads2ea@cmich.edu](mailto:brads2ea@cmich.edu)

Over the past twenty years, an increasing number of critical criminologists have become involved with the National Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (Inside-Out), which brings together university students (outside students) with incarcerated men and women (inside students) for a semester-long course held inside the walls of a correctional institution. This differs radically from the traditional criminology course and the approach of many mainstream criminologists who intentionally remain removed from those that are most directly and punitively impacted by the criminal justice system: incarcerated men and women. Inside-Out encourages scholars and students to move beyond the stereotypes and stigmatizations of prisoners to see them as human beings.

As of 2017, the Inside-Out program has held 50 International Instructor Training Institutes with nearly 800 educators worldwide from 45 states in the U.S. and nine other countries. In total, more than 22,000 inside and outside students have participated in more than 600 courses. Courses have been offered on a range of topics including sociology, criminology, anthropology, philosophy, economics, literature, theatre arts and urban planning. The Inside-Out program makes clear that it does not exist to conduct research on inside students, to act as a “scared straight” program for the outside students, to serve as a whistle-blowing program to expose problems within the facility, or as a venue for developing relationships beyond the parameters of the class. Rather, the goal is to pursue community-based learning that seeks to transcend the walls separating ‘us’ from ‘them’ (The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program 2017).

With the motto of “Social Change through Transformative Education,” Inside-Out pedagogy centers on engagement, dialogue and critical reflection on social issues. As a symbol of inclusiveness and community students sit in a circle within the classroom, alternating between inside and outside students. Rather than relying on instructor-dominated lectures to teach core concepts, Inside-Out courses embrace a discussion-based approach that emphasizes active participation. While the instructor still dictates the topics of the course, the material to read and the assignments produced, their role is one of a facilitator guiding the students through the learning process. Instead of imparting knowledge onto students, the role of the instructor is to create an environment conducive to shared learning. Knowledge drawn forth from students’ perspectives and opinions is as important as the topics and materials covered in the course. In this approach, students learn much more from each other and their own experiences rather than directly from the instructor themselves (For more information on the pedagogy of Inside-Out see Davis and Roswell (2013) and the Special Issue on the Inside-Out Program Exchange Program (2013) in *The Prison Journal* 93(2)).

Within the classroom, icebreaker activities form a base to build trust and community among inside and outside students. Conducted on the first day of class, the Wagon Wheel activity is one

strategy for students to get to know each other individually in a relaxed, non-threatening manner. Students are arranged in two concentric circles with the inner circle facing outward (comprised of the outside students) and the outside circle facing inward (comprised of the inside students), so that each student is facing another. The instructor provides an unfinished sentence such as, “My favorite movie is...,” “If I were an animal I’d be a...,” “I think the most beautiful place in the world is...,” to spark conversation among the dyads. After 1-2 minutes have passed, the instructor prompts the students seated in the outside circle to shift one seat to the right. This process continues until everyone has met the students seated in the opposite circle. Equally successful in both Inside-Out and traditional university courses, students consistently report that the Wagon Wheel activity breaks down initial barriers and prepares students to have substantive discussions on more contentious social issues with their fellow classmates throughout the semester.

One unique facet of many Inside-Out courses is the diversity of the students in terms of race, class, age, and life experience. Compared to colleges and universities that predominantly cater to white, middle-class 18-24 year olds, correctional institutions are disproportionately filled with people of color from poor and working class backgrounds. Moreover, because of the age range of the incarcerated students, older inside students are able to bring an intergenerational perspective to the classroom, something sorely missing from a traditional college course. The diverse life experiences of the inside students combined with the formal education of the outside students come together to produce a unique learning environment unlike any the students have previously experienced.

### *Reflections on teaching social inequality*

As part of the Inside-Out program, I have had the opportunity to teach four sections of the course *Social Issues through the Prism of a Prison (SOC330)* since 2014. The course is designed to survey a range of contemporary social issues. We discuss topics related to criminology and criminal justice such as mass incarceration, social control, victims and victimization and restorative justice, in addition to, more sociological topics including race, class and gender inequality, as well as, collective action and social movements. The course is taught through a mid-size, rural public university in the Midwest. While some of the outside students are economically privileged, others come from the working class. In each of the four cohorts, the vast majority of outside students tend to identify as female and almost all are white. Most of the outside students selected for the course major in sociology, social and criminal justice, youth studies, social work and psychology. Overall, many of the university students lack exposure to people of other races and different class backgrounds. Located in predominantly white, rural community not far from the university, the course is held at a minimum-security state correctional facility for men, one of the largest in the state. Compared to the outside students, the inside students are predominantly black men who come from poor or working class backgrounds and often originate from urban areas.

For many students, as well as myself, this course is likely one of the most diverse spaces for dissecting, debating and addressing social inequalities. Throughout the courses I have facilitated, I have observed students drawing on their lived experiences and perspectives to educate each

other on race, class and gender inequalities. The more students that are willing to open up to the group and share their perspective, the more deeply we were able to explore each topic. When discussing racial inequality, many of the students of color, both inside and out, share their stories of discrimination and oppression throughout society with white students. Some white students even share their examples of stereotypes, racism and white supremacy espoused by close friends and family members. While many of the outside students have read about these realities in their traditionally structured sociology courses, hearing examples vividly illustrated by their fellow classmates creates a profound impression. During our discussions on class inequality, inside students frequently divulge to the group the challenges endured while living in poverty. This includes substance abuse, addiction and mental illness to the stigma and humiliation associated with receiving public assistance. After hearing the lived experience of their peers, many of the middle class outside students report just how much they have taken their economic privilege for granted. When the class reaches the topic of gender inequality, the female students take the lead in educating the inside students about feminism and relatedly LGBTQ rights. Pervasive hegemonic masculinity and homophobia behind the prison walls prevents some inside students from recognizing the discrimination endured by women and members of the LGBTQ community. However, the female outside students are able to draw on both their lived experience as well as what they've learned through their formal education to help the male students gain an appreciation for the harms perpetrated by gender inequality.

After examining race, class and gender inequalities, inside and outside students consistently offer education as a solution to addressing the problem. Some students have even suggested that the Inside-Out program be implemented as a model for diversity education not only within universities, but across correctional facilities as well. Whether following in the example of the Inside-Out program or developing other models for transformative education, there is a need now more than ever for diverse forums for discussing divisive issues. Perhaps this pedagogical approach can help break through the walls that divide us.

## REFERENCES

Davis, Simone Weil and Barbara Sherr Roswell, Eds. 2013. *Turning Teaching Inside Out: A Pedagogy for Community-Based Education*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

“Special Issue: The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program.” 2013. *The Prison Journal* 93(2): 127-247.

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. 2017. Accessed 10/15/17.

<http://insideoutcenter.org/home-temp2-slides.html>

