

CHAPTER 19

Transformative Learning in Prisons and Universities: Reflections on Homologies of Institutional Power

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Proponents of community-based education claim that this teaching offers positive results for the university and the community, enriching student learning beyond traditional classrooms and providing benefits to organizations in the community. Far-reaching transformations are also imagined, such as revitalizing civic engagement and fundamentally changing the mission of higher education to broaden its global impact. These aspirations follow from an ideal of transformative education that has a deep history and diverse ideological foundations, ranging from missionary teaching to progressive left activism. Community-based learning both draws upon these diverse foundations for transformative education and offers new challenges and opportunities for collaboration between the university and the community.

Long before community-based learning became an established component of higher education, my scholarly life was in the community, as an ethnographer of the sociology of law and everyday life.¹ Consequently, my scholarship has been dominated by intellectual problems at the heart of the connection between the researcher and the community. In particular, like most ethnographers, I have devoted serious reflection to the ethical challenges of turning community members into research "subjects." These reflections have often turned to the question of what constitutes transformative sociology and the role of interpretation of personal accounts in the production of sociological critique.² In approaching community-based education from this intellectual tradition, the confident pronouncement of its transformative potential is both longed for and received cautiously. Despite this skepticism, I have been deeply committed to teaching inside prisons for the past seven years as an Inside-Out instructor. This experience provides a perspective from which to

examine the ideal of transformation as the model of Inside-Out teaching imagines it and to reflect upon the implications for the community-based learning movement.

Transformation in the Inside-Out Model

The Inside-Out educational model (as described on its website) promises “transformation” for participants, the prison, and for the larger community. In the context of a “dynamic partnership between institutions of higher learning and correctional systems,” Inside-Out courses are presented as unique opportunities for dialogue and leadership development among diverse students. These opportunities bring about a “paradigm shift” in thinking about crime and social justice that potentially fuels “an engine for social change.”³

In these pronouncements, the potential for transformative learning is linked to the ways the innovative course format allows participants to traverse boundaries between the university and the prison, boundaries that have been created and reinforced by a culture of law and order. Crossing boundaries is theorized as the engine of transformation—the act of going behind walls, both figuratively and literally, creates openings for and deepens dialogue. Creating space for dialogue, in turn, is linked to both the potential for personal redemption and furthering a social change agenda. These conversations “behind the walls” are instrumental to the breaking down of participants’ demonizing stereotypes of the criminal, and this transformation of consciousness is essential to resisting the underlying psychological dynamics that fuel mass incarceration.

This description of the transformative effects of the Inside-Out experience is experientially familiar. Inside-Out instructors (myself included) report remarkable conversations in the classroom that are made possible by the diversity of background and experiences of the students and by the prison setting. Testimonials from both inside and outside students often report “life-changing” effects of participating in a course, such as finding a direction in the pursuit of social justice or renewing their commitment to higher education. These accounts provide evidence of impactful experiences in the classroom that stimulate broad reflection about personal and societal issues. Evaluating whether these impactful experiences are indeed transformative, however, requires a more complex analysis of how the learning is situated in systems of power and domination.

There is another reason to reflect more seriously about the meaning of these accounts. While they attest to the significance and the often-inspirational quality of the course experience, they tell us little about the dynamic processes in a classroom that produce a paradigm shift in students’ thinking about crime and social justice. Specifically, does the crossing of boundaries between the prison and the university produce this transformation? This is the most salient assumption at the core of the transformative ideal of the Inside-Out program: the notion that the conversion of thought and action is linked to the bringing together of the prisoner and “typical” college student, as well as how these courses produce an all-too-rare engagement between two institutions that appear to be fundamentally at cross purposes.

This commentary explores the transformative effects of crossing boundaries and demystifies the distinctions that are often made between academic settings and

carceral institutions. The metaphor of crossing boundaries brings with it powerful assumptions about how universities and prisons are configured in relation to each other within democratic society. This metaphorical distinction is reinforced within each setting; each is laden with symbolic ritual and form that puts the distinction between the university, as the home of freedom and opportunity, and the prison, as a total institution, in stark relief. However, learning happens in both places, and it may arise unexpectedly and unintentionally, and in ways that are truly transformational. The ideal of transformational learning might be better understood by clarifying how the university and the prison represent bounded institutions, while at the same time exhibiting many of the same aspects of institutionalized power and restraints on citizen action. In fact, transformational learning might arise not so much from the unconventional format of an Inside-Out course, but from the opportunity it provides to scrutinize how even revelatory educational practices are deeply entrenched within the power arrangements they seek to change.

The Homology of Universities and Prisons

Inside-Out instructors work within and between two highly bureaucratized organizations, the university and the prison. This means that instructors get a “double-dose” of bureaucratic entanglements (often in their most virulent forms as each resists the implementation of a new program). It also offers an opportunity for insight through a “mirroring effect”: providing a vantage point from which to view the congruity and the discrepancy between them. This vantage point facilitates the participants’ capacity to critique: it allows for recognition of how both institutions, while maintaining distinctive symbolic meaning and function, engage in similar managerial tactics.

While critics have brought attention to the growing tendencies of universities to bend to the will of corporate interests and consumer demands, these critiques often rely upon a comparison with (or lament the growing distance from) the golden age of academe, characterized by faculty governance and autonomy. Such critiques fail to take into account how legalized accountability is fully incorporated into university life.⁴ Under these conditions, the university is a highly regulated environment similar to private workplaces and public institutions. The belief that the university is a unique environment preserved by academic freedom is in contradiction with the fact that faculty are increasingly forced to respond to institutional directives that are wholly inconsistent with the pursuit of knowledge or the achievement of excellence.

Likewise, prisons in the United States are increasingly scrutinized for their exercise of brutalizing power and excessive violence. Yet, over the past 20 years, the correctional system has undergone “modernization” similar to private organizations. This has led to the institution of efficiency measures, flatter management practices, accountability measures, demands for “cultural competence,” and employment of gender-specific management styles. These changes often focus on the performance of correctional officers and their expanding role as “case managers.” The image in the mirror is strikingly similar—as both the university and the prison have their relative autonomy eroded vis-à-vis the state and economy. This is clearly illustrated

by how strict compliance to professional norms is achieved by the same devices in seemingly incongruent settings. Both prisons and universities create pressures on employees (both fit into the category that sociologist Lewis Coser classically described as greedy institutions⁵) that discourage innovation and maintain conformity. Under conditions of advanced capitalism, greedy institutions insist on employees' loyalty and time (despite the pretense of "family friendly" policies). The overwhelming force of greedy institutions is acutely reflected through their capacity to put in place widely accepted and irresistible new standards, and tie together professional competence with adherence to these standards. As a result, workers in prisons and universities follow similar professional directives: One of the most pervasive and defining directives is risk management, where the "risk" being conceived and contained is both monetary and physical, which tightly grips both types of organizations despite the differential factors contributing to potential hazards.

The homology of institutional structures is most evident and striking in the context of day-to-day interactions that confuse or disorient perceptions about "who is making the rules." The Inside-Out program, upon the initiation of each course, blurs these boundaries when it requires all participants to agree to a "contract" that includes the standard set of rules for visitors in correctional institutions (dress code, restrictions on contraband, communication guidelines, etc.) and reinforces them with the potential threat of academic failure. This sets the scene for heightened awareness throughout the course of both formal and informal compliance schemes. Ultimately, the complicity of the Inside-Out program in the forms of institutional power against which it imagines itself to be in opposition sets the stage for critical thinking.

Symbolic Oppositions

Despite the trend toward institutional homology, universities and prisons are steeped in symbolic forms that remind those within and outside of their distinctive character. These powerful symbolic structures serve many functions, including creating the public face of the institution, establishing its political purpose and necessity, reinforcing the idea of its "relative autonomy" (or institutional independence), and defining the institution's role in the delegation of state violence. Universities and prisons exist symbolically in manifest opposition to each other. Consider, for example, how these symbolic divisions are often posed as incontrovertible, while resting upon debatable presuppositions.

- Criminals need reform; students need education.
- Prisons will be unsafe without the opportunity to employ force; universities will fail without academic freedom.
- Prisons require a military chain of command; universities rely upon self-governance.
- Prisons contain surplus populations; universities preserve the domain of the elite.
- Prisons impose rules arbitrarily; universities base decisions on enlightened reason.
- Prisons follow the law's command; universities reinforce standards.

- Prisons reduce risk; universities produce knowledge.
- Prisoners experience total domination; students learn in freedom.
- Violence is endemic to prison life; violence shocks universities.

In an age of mass incarceration, presumptions about crime, criminals, and the prison system are buttressed by the sway of these emblematic boundaries on public opinion. In political discourse, condensation symbols (emotive images that mobilize both fear and the punitive desires of the mass public) further reinforce the image of tightly bounded institutional forms.⁶ Hence these symbols are most potent as abstract cultural ideas.

In post-Fordist capitalist society, this representational apparatus plays another crucial function: masking the expansion of managerial practices of neoliberalism. As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chaipello argue in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, over the past 30 years capitalist enterprise has evolved to incorporate a network-based form of organization.⁷ This furthers a style of management that relies upon meritocratic criteria to hide and legitimate domination. Under the new spirit of capitalism, the firm both neutralizes opposition and increases profitability by incorporating more "lean" forms of management. Most of these reforms occur at the level of middle management, and include such "innovations" as flexible labor, teamwork, multi-skilling, and less hierarchical management practices.

Community-based learning courses, like Inside-Out, may be preparing students for new capitalism rather than providing a radical alternative to it. Ironically, innovative courses often offer skills that are well suited to performing effectively as workers in middle-level management. While traditional college courses often lack such skill-building opportunities, students in community-based learning classes are encouraged to collaborate and develop leadership skills through completing group projects. These forms of interactive and flexible learning (central to the Inside-Out model), therefore, are derived from the new spirit of capitalism rather than essential elements of its critique. Likewise, "community based learning" opportunities are touted as promoting connections with "communities" that are more diverse, politically responsive, and representative of democratic interests. This is an especially dubious assumption for the Inside-Out program, which functions alongside the carceral apparatus and its industrial complex. The community is neither a more democratic nor responsive community, but is a thicket of forces that promote state violence and private profit.

Luc Boltanski has recently argued that despite the emergence of new capitalism, workers (and, in this context, students) experience moments of acute awareness of their situation. He describes these as "metapragmatic moments" that "increase in the level of reflexivity" and "during which the attention of participants shifts from the tasks to be performed to the question of how it is appropriate to characterize what is happening."⁸ At these moments, people question the self-evidence of the process, causing them to look to "rules" and questioning their applicability and fairness. These moments reveal more clearly to workers their position vis-à-vis the firm, but they also expose how the organizations justify their "existence and mask the violence they contain."⁹

In the discussion that follows, I suggest that Inside-Out classrooms are well situated for metapragmatic moments: students within these forums are effectively positioned to observe the conditions that sustain institutionalized violence within

both the university and the prison. Such observations may define the transformative experiences of instructors and students. Transformative learning happens when the symbolic framework breaks down and managerial practices within each institutional setting are consequently made more visible and can thus be called into question.

The Emancipatory Classroom

The metaphor of crossing boundaries, while accurately describing many aspects of the educational experience, seems like a poor fit to describe the potential insights gained from participating in the Inside-Out program. Instead, the enduring impact of Inside-Out courses may arise from the opportunities they provide to observe how the conditions of institutionalized power in universities and prisons are in many ways more similar to each other than forces in dramatic opposition. In this sense, the participants see each institution in “reflection” to the other (as opposed to “crossing into” unknown, rigidly bounded, and totally unfamiliar space). Both inside and outside students, through observation and dialogue, are well positioned to observe the *boundlessness* of many of the forms of social control that pervade modern institutional life. In this sense, students are not the subjects of a transformation, but rather observers of it. Their vantage point allows for an acute recognition of how all citizens, whether or not in the custody of the state, are vulnerable to managerial forms of power. The practice of transformative learning, accordingly, is akin to gaining the skills of an ethnographer. Students learn the art of sociological critique—the capacity to question how institutionalized power is instrumental in the production of knowledge.

What are the aspects of Inside-Out teaching that might heighten students’ awareness about institutional power? In many ways, mindfulness is fostered for the outside students by the expectation of viewing the administration of actual force inside a prison; these expectations, whether realized or not, draw attention to the “real” violence of state authority. This expectation also encourages “reality checks”—instances in which participants are able to compare their assumptions (about the symbolic authority of both prisons and universities) with empirical observations. The classroom scene has the effect of making the following questions ever present in the participants’ consciousness:

- Boundaries—How permeable are they? How is action governed by the state of lockdown?
- Fairness—How is it contingent upon the prerogatives of those exercising institutional control?
- Recognizability—How is the identity of who is an insider and who is an outsider being maintained (despite the efforts to create a learning environment that deconstructs this distinction)? How are all participants (whether from the inside or outside) marked by intelligible signs of class and status?

The primacy of these questions is reinforced both by incidents (clashes with prison authorities that are bound to happen every semester) and by the substantive material discussed. Even more provocative are the connections between the incidents and the academic material.

My Inside-Out course, “Regulating Citizenship,” provides an exploration into the foundations of liberal democratic citizenship as well as examples of situations in which persons gain or lose their rights of citizenship, in the broadest sense of exercising their capacity to a full and meaningful life. We begin the course by reading John Locke, a text that allows them to think about tacit agreement not only with the state but also within the prison.¹⁰ This awakens students’ common-sense notions about power and legitimacy, in particular, the uncertain foundations of taken-for-granted rules and institutional norms. Discussing Locke enables students to more acutely recognize that the legitimation of the state mostly relies upon “freely given” consent and submission to the anticipation of force. Traditional political science courses produce the same kind of familiar insights. *Regulating Citizenship*, however, provides the context for students, as prisoners or as citizens who delegate their prerogative to punish to the state, to question the unfounded, but commonplace, assumption that confinement negates the citizenship rights of those behind bars. Inside students, in particular, often enter the course believing they exist as noncitizens, essentially in exile, rather than knowing that the power of the state to confine is carefully delineated (by the proportionality of appropriate punishment and the requirement that the state act in the interest of the “common good”). This immediately forces students to confront their shared power, as citizens invested in the common good, as well as their shared powerlessness (imposed not by wrongdoing against the state but by the bargain that induced consent to democratic governance). In this way, their equality, as citizens and students, is established not only by the practices of the Inside-Out teaching model, but also by the foundations of democratic theory.

At the same time, students also encounter the notion of political responsibility, as it is defined not only by obligations to obey state authority, but also by the vigilance required to assure that a democratic government fulfills its promise to promote the common good. This inquiry forces a redefinition of how most students have been taught to think about what it means to be a “responsible citizen.” Prior teachings about responsibility often have immediate potency, especially for inside students who, simultaneous to taking an Inside-Out course, are compelled to complete programming that urges them to take individual “responsibility” for their addictions, obligations to work (rather than steal), and for harm caused to others.¹¹ Many of the outside students, who enjoy the benefits of a liberal arts education, simply assume that acting responsibly as citizens is inherent in their “goodness,” manifested by the rewards of status and privilege they enjoy. Both groups of students come to realize that neither strategy promotes responsible citizenship, in the sense of exercising their duties to question the legitimacy of state power.

Moreover, classroom discussion reveals how the liberal foundation of politics are deeply depoliticizing: while Locke invested the right to revolution to remain with the people, living in a democratic society provides rather limited opportunities for the political experience of ruling and active participation in shaping public affairs. To live responsibly in a democracy, therefore, citizens must retain their “political sensibilities” (for equality, democracy, and participation) after agreeing to the social contract. This broader notion of political responsibility is all the more important to acknowledge under the conditions of new capitalism. A managerial society is intrinsically depoliticizing—as market forces squeeze out the consideration of social

values that lack relevancy to the promotion of economic efficiency. This process of discovery in the context of an Inside-Out course is often not abstract; it is experienced as students risk disciplinary consequences for publically speaking about unjust practices inside the prison and ideas for group projects are quelled by rules (often paradoxically designed to protect the prisoners' rights under conditions of confinement). Through these experiences, students learn that, under the conditions of new capitalism, creativity and rebellion are only allowed within delineated parameters.

In the Inside-Out classroom, students are often able to create moments of democratic participation, as they reinvent themselves as a collectivity of diverse citizens. The idea of responsibility reemerges, in being accountable to each other, as the community establishes trust and adopts an ethos of local citizenship. The students engage in a collective experiment in which they practice conducting themselves as responsible citizens in the broadest sense. In this community, like all political communities, trouble arises from inevitable conditions that create unfairness and inequality. When trouble occurs, it provides occasions to reflect upon their responsibilities as individuals, even under conditions of coercive institutional control. For example, the outside students at times are confronted by situations or conversations in which they realize their role in keeping the inside students confined (e.g., specifically by following the prison rules that are ostensibly designed to prevent escape or, more abstractly, by implicitly consenting to the excessive penalty that has led to the growth of the prison population). Sometimes this realization is dramatic. Halfway through the semester, one of my inside students is reassigned from the full security section of the facility to "minimum." My outside students are not aware of this particular student's change of status, and as we leave the class the inside student, fairly nonchalantly, walks beyond the usual corridor to which he has been confined and joins us in the "trap". In their silence (and expression of puzzlement on their faces), I see my students ponder: Who is watching? Should I "tell" on my classmate? Am I entrusted with the "security" role as an outsider? Does the prison care, or need to care, if this individual walks out? If the whole purpose of this maximum-security facility is to keep "them" inside, why is it so seemingly easy to get out? Possibly, the inside student muses—why does walking into the trap create shock in the eyes of fellow students who just convincingly treated me as a peer?

Institutional power is also made more transparent when security measures seem excessive, redundant, and intrusive. The class period is always interrupted by two "counts" (periodic lockdowns in which the correctional officers officially record the presence of every inmate) within 40 minutes of each other. Counts are serious business—if all inmates are not accounted for the facility will remain in lockdown. The correctional officer enters the classroom during counts and attempts to do his job, hindered by the quite striking capacity of an Inside-Out course to create an isolated environment of freedom in the midst of a correctional institution. During counts, the students observe remarkable aspects of the relationship between correctional officers and the people who are imprisoned there. They take note that every officer exercises a different style of control, ranging from respect and friendliness to officiousness and rudeness. My unwillingness to stop the class is tolerated by all of the officers despite the fact it causes them problems. Many of the officers don't know the inside students' names despite living under conditions of forced intimacy;

as a consequence, they sometimes mistake an outside student as a prisoner. This display causes the students to question the purpose of the counts, especially when identification of who belongs inside becomes awkward. Ultimately, counts provide educational moments in which the authority of the classroom community runs up against the power of an institution defined by its security mandate. The seeming casualness of the exercise of power is a demonstration of assuredness of the security function of the prison. When students watch the performance of counts by correctional officers, they gain awareness about how coercive violence is exercised in a managerial organization. Throughout the course, students are given abundant opportunities to consider whether "what feels like freedom" under these conditions is actually closely guarded thought and behavior.

The Transformative as Ordinary Education

What I have described as transformative education in my course *Regulating Citizenship* is played out in Inside-Out courses that explore quite different subject matter and pose other interesting theoretical questions. What is crucial to creating opportunities for transformative insight is students' direct confrontation with the dynamic tension between the symbolic framework of the prison and the everyday exercise of managerial power within the classroom. What makes Inside-Out a project of transformative education is inherent to any setting that allows for this kind of questioning of institutional arrangements. Inside-Out courses are positioned to present these opportunities in abundance; this is primarily due to the fact that instructors and students are deliberately engaged in establishing a community (amidst a backdrop of a symbolically opposing idea of community) in which questions of boundaries, fairness, and recognizability can be actively addressed.

Moreover, the idea of transformative education offered here reinforces the notions that learning bears close resemblance to scholarship. Students, like critical scholars, struggle to understand not only how power operates under the conditions of late capitalism, but also how emancipatory impulses can be realized in a depoliticized and market-driven society. The methodology of transformative teaching is essentially ethnographic; it depends on observing contradictions and uncertainties as they manifest themselves in everyday life.

Although this analysis has emphasized the homology between universities and prisons, it is important to qualify how Inside-Out courses present different opportunities for transformative learning depending on which institution is your home. Despite their similarities, the prison and the university both function independently, and in opposition to each other, to powerfully determine the life chances of two separate groups of young adults in American society. Incarceration results in lost educational opportunity, poor employment prospects, and the reinforcement of racial and ethnic discrimination. Conversely, admittance to university usually enables students to maintain or improve class status and prospects for a career. Prison education programs hope to close this gap, but only a fundamental transformation in the function of both prisons and universities would break down the existing forces that are at work. The presence of a single "college class" inside a maximum security prison may have some demonstrable effect on the quality of life on the inside, yet it

would be absurd to suggest that it significantly changes the institutional mandates of prisons. Prisoners who benefit greatly from higher education face a litany of institutional barriers once released. Likewise, even the most transformative curriculum taught inside prisons pushes against, rather than fundamentally challenges, the academic conventions that define knowledge and learning within accredited institutions of higher education. The enormity of these problems, and their rootedness in an unequal opportunity structure, provide a backdrop that allays far-reaching claims for the transformative potential of community-based education.

Yet with the scarcity of vitally necessary college programs in prisons, Inside-Out courses provide extraordinary opportunities for learning. The classroom experiences allow both groups of participants to think reflectively about their institutional lives and to experiment with new forms of democratic participation. In a neoliberal society, educational opportunities that stimulate metapragmatic reflection are both rare and significant to furthering the larger political objective of building spaces for freedom.

Notes

1. See, for example, Kristin Bumiller, *The Civil Rights Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988) and *In an Abusive State* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).
2. For a discussion of these issues confronting sociology, see, for example, Pierre Bourdieu and Loic J. D. Wacquant, eds, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
3. <http://www.insideoutcenter.org>.
4. For further elaboration on the effects of legalized accountability, see Charles R. Epp, *Making Rights Real* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
5. Lewis A. Coser, *Greedy Institutions* (New York: Free Press, 1974).
6. Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964).
7. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chaipello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Verso, 2007).
8. Luc Boltanski, *On Critique* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), 67.
9. Boltanski, *On Critique*, 156.
10. The students read sections of John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* and the appropriately critical companion piece by Sheldon Wolin, "Fugitive Democracy" in *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*, ed. Seyla Benhabib (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 31–45.
11. For a critique of this programming see my recent chapter, "Incarceration, Welfare State, and Labor Market Nexus: The Increasing Significance of Gender in the Prison System," in *Women Exiting Prison: Critical Essays on Gender, Post-Release Support and Survival*, ed. Bree Carlton and Marie Segrave (New York: Routledge, 2013), 13–33.

CHAPTER 20

Access or Justice? Inside-Out and Transformative Education

Gillian Harkins

By working to serve individual students, do we suggest the correctness and justness of the institutions and systems that they find themselves in and that we support with our own work? Conversely, by working to address the manifest injustices in such a system, do we neglect the individual lives presently caught within it? I would argue that, at least in spirit, these are questions almost any teacher in any institution could ask about the work they do.

Kirk Branch, *Eyes on the Ought to Be*¹

In scholarly research, answers are only as good as the further questions they provoke, while for activists, answers are as good as the tactics they make possible.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag*²

In keeping with the spirit of the epigraphs offered here, this essay raises more questions than it answers. How do we imagine and institute the aims of higher education in systems that have historically separated "scholarly research" and "activism"? And how do we shift our tactics to address recent changes in these systems brought about by neoliberal reforms, which combine a philosophy of free-market enterprise with policies limiting state support for education and increasing state support for incarceration? Given this context, how can we strategize to link efforts to increase access to higher education inside prisons with the broader goals of education justice? Efforts to answer these questions are already underway among activists and scholars working within the constraints of existing institutions. This essay adds to the conversation by exploring how higher education in prison programs