


Equity in the Prison Classroom: A learning curve for higher education

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This position paper highlights the ways in which inequities are present within the prison higher education classroom and between the prison- and campus-based classrooms. The exploration of the teaching challenges inherent in this environment, as well as practices to mitigate the impact of the inequities, is useful for college and university faculty and administrators designing prison-based programs. The reflections here are based on experience within both state and federal womens prisons in the state of Minnesota.

Keywords: equity, inequity, women, prison, higher education, incarceration

Background

In 2022, when I taught in a prison for the first time, I held unconscious assumptions about the general notion of prison. Namely, I assumed that once incarcerated people were all more-or-less operating from an even playing field, independent of how their lives were outside of those walls and fences. I would not have been able to tell you that was my assumption before I taught there, but it was. My simplistic notions were quickly disrupted in both a state womens prison and federal womens prison, both in the state of Minnesota in the United States.

Observations and Reflections

Initially, I noticed¹ subtle ways in which inequities manifested in the prison classroom. Incarcerated persons are required to wear uniforms and are strictly limited in personal expression through clothing, makeup, and hair. On a superficial level, I saw that indeed they all wore versions of the uniform within a narrow range, but I also noticed under the classroom tables that students shoes varied. There were white, standard issue shoes, and then there were more stylish, brand name tennis shoes, which indicated financial resources either personal contributions to the commissary fund or from friends and family on the outside.

I learned from my escort, the corrections officer responsible for both my movements within the prison, and those of the students registered for my class, that incarcerated persons have access to a catalog of items they can order if they have money. The commissary stocks non-perishables for purchase that allow them to cook their own meals instead of eating at the chow hall where standard meals are provided. They can buy hot pots and sports bras and art supplies, among other things, if

they have access to funds. It was evident that socioeconomic disparities from the outside were reproduced on the inside.

Some students wore altered clothing or dyed their hair, for example, both of which could require some skilled assistance (and some of which risked a rule violation with repercussions). Trading for items and services was common, and easier for those with resources to offer. It may not seem like a hardship from the outside, since few people expect prison to be easy, but having access to these symbolic indicators of a personal sphere of control held meaning for the individual. Based on observations alone, students able to present a version of themselves that was closer to their desired perception appeared more self-assured in both interpersonal interactions and coursework.

There were more obvious academic inequities among students. Those who had previously taken college courses seem to have more confidence when engaging in prison-based higher education. They understood how to manage their time to complete the coursework and how to ask for help from the instructor or others. Some students offered expert insight related to their previous exposure to the course content. Some were also better able to find parallels in their personal experiences and communicate their learning in ways that better resonated in that context. Also, in some cases, students helped other students who needed more individualized support than could be provided within the constraints of a prison-based program.

Those who have more life experience were better able to navigate the prison system and advocate for themselves, whether to secure training and job opportunities, mental health support, or health care. Those who had more connections outside of the prison could stay abreast of technological advances in society,

¹My observations, it should be noted, are as a white, middle-aged cisgender female with a middle class background.

which were largely absent from prisons (there are marked distinctions between technology access in federal prisons versus Minnesota state prisons, but very limited in both). They were able to tap into these contacts for ideas about course learning activities. If students were asked to pay attention to current events, they may have recalled a television news story that they could ask their friend or family member on the outside to investigate further. If discussing jobs related to the course content, some students connected with someone who worked in the field or at least knew someone. But, it costs money by the minute to contact friends and family by phone or the messaging service (which gets expensive if you have never been taught how to type).

The students selected for our program applied to the university as part of the admissions process. A barrier that emerged was that of unpaid balances for college classes taken before the period of incarceration. As a policy, the university does not accept students who still owe elsewhere, which may disadvantage some groups more than others. Based on the experiences of our programs in both federal and state prisons, this appears to disproportionately impact students of color, which has meant that the majority of students accepted into our program were white. For low balances, such as below \$1,000, a phone call to those colleges could sometimes result in waiving that balance so that they could take advantage of the opportunity to study during incarceration, but it is not guaranteed.

As alluded to earlier in this essay, having access to resources on the outside created more flexibility on the inside, but not just with respect to apparel or what was in the news. I was most struck by the inequities within higher education in prison when I learned what it meant for an incarcerated person in the state prison to choose higher education as their prison job. Each person was required to hold a job while incarcerated, but the pay difference between a typical prison job, such as manufacturing apparel for a segment of uniformed state government, was higher than the pay for higher education at the state prison. The highest pay at the time was \$2 an hour, which provided \$80 a week at best. Higher education, on the other hand, paid less than \$10 a week. Those who chose higher education for their job either had access to sufficient resources without the higher paying job, or they possessed an incomparable amount of hope that higher education could change the direction of their lives. This is fundamentally exploitative within a capitalist system and contrary to the stated goals of rehabilitation. Some incarcerated people in the U.S. have taken up the issue by forming unions to represent this area of labor which, by and large, society ignores.

As teachers we know that the personal lives of our students show up in myriad ways in the classroom, and incarcerated students are no exception. Healthy relationships with friends or family provides stability for students, and in their absence students may struggle. Many incarcerated women have children, though not all of them have parental rights, which can create

inner turmoil, parenting challenges, and sometimes legal processes that cause distress. Some may have children with more than one partner who are the gatekeepers to access. Someone incarcerated in a federal prison, as compared to a state prison, may be thousands of miles away from their children and other people in their support network. Of course, the same people who lacked high quality representation in the courtroom also lacked high quality representation while incarcerated. In these and other ways, the disparities of class, gender, and racial identity are front and center in prisons. As is the case in the campus-based classroom (or virtual classroom), there are also incarcerated students in treatment for mental health issues. Changes made to their medication can affect their participation in class. The so-called pill line may have been formed in the middle of class, so some students exited the classroom to receive their scheduled medications. Those struggling with addiction, even if completely sober in prison, may have been engaged in therapy or undergoing medication-assisted treatment for opioid addiction. If there were behavioral challenges, the prison officials decided whether the student can attend class. The instructor had no opportunity to provide input. For example, one of my students was sent to segregation with no ability to complete the course except for the work completed before the disciplinary action. These cases demonstrated the need for a particular pedagogical approach. Knowing that a student may miss several weeks of a semester for reasons both within and outside of their control, necessitated an approach that allowed the student to build their grade each week, rather than an all-or-nothing model of a single mid-term and final.

On campus we direct students to other campus-based resources when appropriate: mental health, personal safety (and mandatory reporting), academic advising, peer support networks, student groups and organizations, free food, and financial aid. In the prison-based higher education program, students were largely beholden to the structure and processes of the prison itself, as are the instructors. As a result, there were inequities between students in the class, as well as compared to those studying on campus (face-to-face or virtually). A course scheduled for early evening during Ramadan meant that students would miss portions of class periods for several weeks. Students could be called out of class for any reason that is outside of their control. There was no end to the variables.

Creating More Equitable Classrooms in Prisons

If true equity is elusive due to factors outside of the classroom, then how do we create the most equitable classroom possible? Below are seven tips for creating effective and equitable learning experiences for higher education students in prison settings.

- **1. Differences:** Students in any setting are not standardized entities. There are four important differences to take into account when teaching higher education classes in a prison setting: First, students who are incarcerated

do not have equal access to information, similar life experiences to one another, or shared skills. Second, not all students can complete group projects outside of the classroom because they live in separate units and have differing privileges within the prison. Third, students' dates of release are not remotely similar and are often not aligned with the term of study. And fourth, students don't always possess a vision for application of the course content within a medium-term timeframe.

- **2. Assignments:** Provide small- and medium-stakes assignments. This will enable students to build a grade, rather than placing too much emphasis on a mid-term and final. This will also mitigate the impact of losing a student mid-semester for one reason or another.
- **3. Religious calendars:** Review religious calendars. Be sure to schedule courses on dates and at times that work for most if not all.
- **4. Content:** Provide all necessary content material (including articles, videos, and other material). This enables all students to study from the same set of materials which, in turn, avoids inadvertently creating advantages for those with resources to contact people outside the prison.
- **5. Resources:** Learn how to direct students to resources within the prison when students are less comfortable seeking the help they need.
- **6. Extra credit:** Provide extra credit opportunities so that students can balance out class periods missed for reasons beyond the students' control.
- **7. Positive assumptions:** Do not make negative assumptions. First, students want to know that their learn-

ing matters today, not just at some future date when they are released or off-paper or have parental rights or hold a legitimate job. Second, students are often hungry for opportunities to contribute to the world immediately, whether by helping someone else understand an idea, building the confidence of a classmate, or contacting a public official about their experience of incarceration. Third, many students are able to direct their own learning to a great extent, so choices in how the learning outcomes are achieved are welcome, as are prompt responses to their inquiries for more information. And fourth, we are not the experts in what their experiences are as incarcerated students.

Final Word

These observations largely focus on higher education within the system as it currently exists. It does not speak to addressing the societal inequities and injustices that contribute to having the highest rate of incarceration of any similarly stable nation in the world. In the macroenvironment, there is the justice system, the correctional system, and vast racial and socioeconomic disparities within each. Any single prison-based higher education program, whether in a state or federal institution, may choose to focus on the microenvironment—the prison and its management, collaborations across programs, advocacy for colleges to leverage Pell grants for incarcerated students—while broader higher education systems may choose to influence state governments in policymaking related to prevention strategies, educational access, appropriate mental health and addiction treatment, and meaningful reentry support that starts before release. There is a spectrum of opportunity, not least of which is the classroom itself.