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**Lori Pompa**

## **Disturbing Where We Are Comfortable Notes From Behind the Walls**

This article explores a unique approach to becoming literate about prisons --through a dialogical exchange between individuals on both sides of the wall. The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program offers a semester-long course through which college students and incarcerated men or women attend class together weekly inside a local correctional facility. Pivotal to this pedagogy is the power and reciprocity of the exchange between the "inside" and "outside" students. The depth of discussion involved, the collaborative nature of the engagement, and the consideration of the issues (literally from the inside, out)--together encompass an approach to learning that changes lives.

Countless books have been written about "life on the inside," comprising quite a respectable body of prison literature. The idea of "prison literacies," however, transcends the act of reading about life behind the walls. To become truly "literate" about prisons, we need to move out of the safety that distance provides, and go there—in order to learn, to experience, to be disturbed, *to read the life itself*. It is the difference between "reading the word" and "reading the world" (Freire).

The "literacies" of prison life abound—layers of reality waiting to be "read" and understood by those on either side of the wall. The questions haunt: Who is incarcerated? Who is not? What variables (social, structural, systemic, economic, psychological, political, racial) led to the men and women on the inside being there? And what is life like on the inside? Is there any truth to the myths that we believe about prisons and the purposes they purport to serve? In the end, does anybody really care? Why should we?

These and many other questions bombarded me when I first set foot in prison nearly 20 years ago as a volunteer in the local jail system. On my first day, I went to Holmesburg Prison, a decrepit maximum security facility in Philadelphia, so unlivable that it was finally closed as it neared its hundredth year. I can remember that day as if it were yesterday—the smells, the sights, the sounds, the overall feeling of the place. It was a sensory cacophony of stale sweat, old sneakers, clanging bars, crumbling cement, deafening announcements over the P.A. system, and men...hundreds of men, who seemed to be locked in some bizarre dance, a listless fugue arrested in time. That was the sense I got

that day—the feeling that, underneath the incessant noise and activity, lay silence and inertia. There were realities behind those walls that I wanted to understand, truths hidden beneath the surface that begged to be revealed.

Ironically, I began my involvement in prison as a “literacy” tutor, helping men behind the walls learn to read. Quickly realizing that my attempts at tutoring left much to be desired, what happened instead is that I became literate—I learned, from some wonderful tutors over the years, how to “read” life as it is lived behind the walls. My sojourn has taken me inside prisons and jails thousands of times in varying capacities over the past two decades. During that time, the questions have not abated; in fact, they have grown only deeper, more disturbing, and consequently, more provocative.

Eleven years ago, when I began to teach criminal justice at Temple, I decided to give my students the gift of disturbance. What better way to examine the most central questions of crime and justice than to come face to face with the issues as experienced by the men and women caught up in the system? So far, more than 6,000 students have visited several correctional facilities in the area—county jails, state prisons, youth detention facilities, community correctional centers, and substance abuse treatment programs. These trips provide some of the most compelling experiences one could have—the kinds of experiences that are very hard to shake. And that is precisely why we do it. I don’t want my students to be able to easily shake these encounters; in fact, I want the students to be shaken by them. Just as I have always been.

Sometime in the mid-90s, I took a class to meet with a group of life-sentenced men at a state prison three hours away from Temple’s campus in Philadelphia. During the tour of this facility, the students began discussing with the “lifers” issues of economics, politics, race and class, and—related to it all—crime and how we respond to it. One of the prisoners remarked about how beneficial it would be to have an ongoing dialogue about these and other issues. Everyone agreed, while realizing that the distance was prohibitive.

However, the seed was sown, and within a few months, with the support of Temple and the Philadelphia Prison System, I created a course called “Inside-Out” (or, by its more formal title, “The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program: Exploring Issues of Crime and Justice Behind the Walls”). Since 1997, Inside-Out has been conducted 13 times at the Philadelphia Industrial Correctional Center (PICC), part of a large urban jail system 25 minutes from campus, and twice at the State Correctional Institution at Graterford. To date, more than 500 students (from the “inside” and the “outside”) have taken part.

### **A Literacy of Layers**

Each semester, a group of 15-18 Temple students goes to prison to attend class. In the Fall, we have class with men in PICC; in the Spring, with women in

PICC; and in the summer, with men in Graterford. We hold sessions once a week for 2½ hours and address a separate topic each time, including: what prisons are for; why people get involved in crime; the myths and realities of prison life; victims and victimization; and the distinction between punishment and rehabilitation. The entire course is conducted inside of prison, except for a briefing and debriefing—held separately with each group—at the beginning of the semester.<sup>1</sup>

College students and incarcerated students come together within the setting that serves as part of the context of the learning. The “outside” students and I are provided a unique window into the vicissitudes of the criminal justice system, and the more we go in and out each week, the deeper and more complex the questions become. It leads to a process of exploration, through which, together with the “inside” students, we come to “read” and interpret the manifold stories of life behind bars.

Most college courses are lectures and readings which, later on, we are supposed to apply to real-life situations. This class was a real-life situation itself. The readings gave all of us facts, statistics, and the opinions of the ‘experts,’ but the class itself was what gave the course an additional meaning and another dimension. The students in the class gave it life—we taught each other more than can be read in a book.  
(Kerry, Temple participant)

This unique educational experience provides dimensions of learning that are difficult to achieve in a traditional classroom. At its most basic level, Inside-Out allows the “outside” students to take the theory they have learned and apply it in a real-world setting, while those living behind the walls are able to place their life experiences in a larger academic framework. However, much more occurs in the exchange—layers of understanding that defy prediction. In our discussions, myriad life lessons and realizations surface about how we as human beings operate in the world, beyond the myths and stereotypes that imprison us all.

As a class, we do quite a bit of reading—five or six books in all. The readings include both criminal justice texts and narratives by and about men and women who are incarcerated. In “reading the word” (the assigned texts), a more profound reading transpires: we enter into the process of what Paulo Freire calls “reading the world.” Students from the outside not only read about issues of crime, justice, and incarceration, but also learn in a deeper way about these issues through the discussions, exchanges, and encounters that comprise the experience. The “inside” students offer a unique perspective on the various topics discussed, given their direct experience with criminal activity, the criminal justice system, and the daily realities of their life behind the walls.

At the same time, students from the inside have the opportunity to “read” their world in a different way. All too often, some of the incarcerated students will, with great poignancy, talk about seeing themselves on the pages of some of

the books, especially in relation to statistics describing crime or incarceration rates. Though initially distressing, these revelations have proven to be both challenging and empowering to the “inside” students. For many, it is the first time that they have looked at their own issues in a larger framework, recognizing the text of their lives in relation to the context of the criminal justice system. It is a compelling example of “reading” one’s life in an entirely new way.

I am well aware that people feel disaffected, dehumanized, and at times downright angry at the system, as well they should be. Still, we need to be willing to not only take personal responsibility for our behavior, but also for allowing the system to function in its current condition. (Tom, Graterford participant)

The class also does a significant amount of writing throughout the semester: six or seven substantive reflection papers, as well as a more lengthy final integrative paper. These assignments afford both the “outside” and “inside” students the opportunity to make their own connections between the themes discussed in the prior class, the readings associated with that class session, and their own thinking about the particular topic.

Each reflection paper is divided into three sections: the first calls for students to make observations about and comment on the ongoing dynamics of the process; the second focuses on the topic of that week, requiring students to discuss pertinent issues, incorporating quotes and citations from readings; and the third asks the students to reflect briefly on their own reactions at that point in the semester—noting any internal shifts that may have occurred in response to what has been happening in the class meetings. The final paper is similar, though entailing more breadth and depth in its scope.

### **A Literacy of Reciprocity**

As a particular model in the service learning genre, Inside-Out affords college students an experience of immersion, providing direct exposure to the exigencies of the particular context of prison, while engendering deep interaction and connection with the men and women incarcerated there. It is the ultimate border-crossing experience. When students attend class together as equals, borders disintegrate and barriers recede. What emerges is the possibility of considering the subject matter from a new context—that of those living within that context. The interplay of content and context provides a provocative juncture that takes the educational process to a deeper level.

The approach to service learning used in Inside-Out provides a reciprocal arrangement—everyone serves, everyone is served. The course is arranged in such a way that we all teach and we all learn together, in a true partnership. The service, therefore, is less a question of “doing for” than “being with,” a mutual exchange. In this way, if anything is “done for” those on the inside, it is being

afforded value as human beings with ideas and experiences to contribute, an opportunity that is extremely rare behind bars.

From the first moment I came into contact with the students, it was an experience out of the ordinary. I felt like a saltwater fish moving into fresh water. Years of conditioning by brutality, anger, hatred, mistrust, and guarded emotions left me unprepared for the reception and humanness with which the Temple students greeted me. (Trevor, Graterford participant)

One of the strengths of this form of service learning lies in the dialogical interaction that takes place between and among those involved. This dialogue occurs on many levels and is multi-dimensional in character. We have come to call this process “interflecting,” a practice of communal reflection on issues through a non-hierarchical, fully mutual exchange. Interflection takes the individual reflective process to a deeper level, as it calls for input from individuals to further advance the understanding of the group and, in so doing, enriches and enhances the insight of everyone involved. Participants share ideas, perceptions, perspectives, analyses, critiques—verbalizing realities with and for one another. Fundamentally, it fosters an atmosphere in which people feel increasingly free to “speak their lives,” encouraged by the simple yet profound act of being together—an atmosphere of characterized by reciprocity, dignity, and gradually developing trust.

This class was not like anything I had experienced before. I did learn quite a bit, but it was the ‘interpersonal stuff’ that I valued the most. I really feel like I connected with people, on a human level. What a change it is to be treated with kindness and respect.... My classmates not only wanted to hear what I had to say, but trusted me enough to share of themselves. (Tom, Graterford participant)

I see my role as facilitating a learning process, by creating an atmosphere in which those involved can experience, examine, and explore together. This perspective takes the focus off the instructor as receptacle and dispenser of knowledge, challenging learners to take responsibility for their own and each other’s education. Through a participatory methodology, theoretical knowledge is enhanced in ways that are difficult to replicate through a solely didactic pedagogy. Since we don’t live “from the eyebrows up,” it may be time for us to reconsider our timeworn “eyebrows up” mode of education, recognizing the further dimensions of understanding that can be reached through a modality of total engagement. If we conceive of the process of education as “drawing forth,” as its etymology suggests, we can then see these contextualized, engaged experiences as conduits through which newly integrated realizations can emerge.

‘Inside-Out’ is the perfect name for this class for two main reasons. One reason is that the things we have learned on the inside, we can teach those individuals on the outside who might not understand

what it is like to be in prison. The second reason is that over the course of the semester, everything that I have learned has changed my view of the criminal justice [system] and has in some ways changed me as a person (Kim, Temple participant)

The heart of this methodology is in providing a framework within which the issues that we are studying can be examined in depth. This exploration is mediated through an ongoing group process, in which everyone is afforded the space to raise questions, challenge each other, offer diverse perspectives, and wrestle with the idiosyncratic nature of our system of crime and justice. My hope is that, by the end of the semester, each participant has developed more than merely the ability to take in information, but rather, the capacity to inquire, analyze, critique, challenge—or be challenged by—the information acquired. I want my students to know the issues thoroughly, especially as they impact their own lives and that of others, and to then take an active role in addressing issues of crime, justice, and incarceration as they are played out in the public arena. That, to me, is the essence of literacy.

### **A Literacy of Context**

In shifting the focus from the passive acquisition of knowledge to a fully integrated, dynamic process of discovery, an essential ingredient is participatory dialogue. At the beginning of the semester, the class develops its own guidelines for dialogue, agreed to by everyone and adhered to throughout the semester. Defining and refining these guidelines is a fascinating process, calling for a relatively large group to negotiate consensus.

A subject that we explore during this guideline process is the idea of context—understanding that we each have one—and that our unique context, and all that has helped to form it, influences how we hear, speak, and take in our surroundings. Wrestling with complex issues, in which varying perspectives emerge, calls for participants to extend themselves and suspend their judgments to maximize the learning for the group as a whole.

I learned to listen to others instead of talking. I learned there can be one issue with twelve different opinions on that issue. I learned people will always see a situation differently. (Sophia, Temple participant)

A fundamental issue that we discuss at this juncture is that each of us has a culture within which we were raised, comprised of our ethnicity, socio-economic status, religious beliefs, neighborhood, and many other factors. This culture heavily informs the lens through which we see, experience, and interpret the world. When we are “locked into” a particular cultural perspective—whether that is the culture of the prison, the culture of middle-class America, the culture of the streets, the culture of the “educated”—it becomes difficult to remain open to points of view that are divergent with that perspective. Often, these cultur-

al influences are so deeply ingrained that we are unaware of the depth of their impact on us. By examining our cultural preconceptions, we realize that we overlay these perspectives on everything that we do and say, as well as on how we interact with the world.

My worldviews and thought process have changed dramatically. I have thrown out the labels that are placed on people and have grown to understand that everyone comes from a different context and background.” (Patrice, Temple participant)

A further dimension of context refers to the setting in which the learning takes place, and its effect on virtually every aspect of the experience. In prison, the environment has a significant impact on everyone involved and on everything we do. The simple act of getting into prison each week for class can, in and of itself, be an inordinately complex and frustrating task. What the college students glean from these experiences, however irksome, puts them directly in touch with the inherent frustrations of the context in which their incarcerated classmates reside. For those imprisoned in the facility, the setting from whence they come and to which they return each class day is authoritarian and oppressive. It is an environment that is antithetical to what is necessary for a productive, creative educational process.

The prison robs people not only of time on the outside, but it also robs them of time on the inside. When you stand inside the walls, it feels as though time is standing still. It feels as though you are not moving, not being productive, not being an active participant in the world, but rather a passive participant who has relinquished the right to control his or her own time. (Sarah S., Temple participant)

Attention and care are vital in fashioning a positive learning environment in which people feel safe to be themselves. In prison, where trust is elusive, creating this sort of setting calls for great awareness on the part of the instructor. Additionally, as issues that emerge can be difficult and sensitive, the group needs to feel that the experience is contained, on the one hand, and unrestricted, on the other. The instructor has to be alert to group dynamics at all times, developing a sense of how to balance the theoretical and the experiential, the personal and the generic, the individual and the collective. Fundamentally, the group needs the assurance that, no matter what happens—in the classroom interaction or in the prison setting itself—the instructor will be able to handle it.

Class sessions were not ‘classes’ by the usual standard. They were safety nets, zones by which we could come together and discuss issues commonly significant to all of us, problems and solutions that we felt were important to consider and resolve. (Candy, Temple participant)

Developing an environment marked by trust and freedom of expression within the confines of a prison is a challenge, if not somewhat of a political act. In a place where human beings are confined to cages, and where security is the

primary objective, bringing college students behind the walls to have class with men and women inside is a powerful statement. The fact that we are afforded the freedom to create a somewhat “normal” atmosphere in which to learn and discover is quite extraordinary.

Every time we go to [prison] and have class or even have ‘normal’ interactions with the guys there, we are in fact engaged in an act of resistance. It is a space that humanizes the inmates and forces all of us to deeply question the utility of the existing system of punishment. (Diditi, Temple participant)

### **A Literacy of Liberation**

Prisons come in different shapes and sizes. We all have them. There are things in each of our lives that constrain us, keeping us captive through subtle, often invisible, means. We allow our fears, anger, and despair to keep us locked in, locked up, locked out. Too often we are unaware of what keeps us imprisoned.

In light of this, there is a liberating quality to becoming literate. The inability to read—whether the writing in a book, or “the writing on the wall,” or even the writing on our own hearts—can keep any one of us trapped in a narrow, limited world. Sometimes, I may allow myself to be confined by internal or external forces, unaware of the power that I have to “read” my reality differently. Personal “literacy,” and consequently, some measure of liberation, may come from being able to “parse” the sentence that is my life, understanding the various parts that make up the whole and their relation to one another. It is fundamentally about self-knowledge—on the part of any one of us, no matter which side of the wall we are on—and the freedom that it bestows.

Personally, I’ve never experienced the things which took place in this program from any other program. I went through countless emotional changes and learned things about myself I could never have learned from any other program. (Fox, Graterford participant)

To extend this analogy, as we each come to understand the components of our own individual “sentences,” an appreciation for the larger story emerges—a story comprised of many sentences, all of which are synergistically connected. In the Inside-Out class, we develop and explore together our shared “story”—that of our class, our society, and our world. Through our ongoing dialogue, we come to understand the relationship between these individual “sentences” of ours and the larger “story,” learning to “read” our personal and collective realities in new, creative, and critical ways.

[This class] has acted as the catalyst in my passion for life and human rights, and was the pivotal point where I realigned my own path....[T]his program has brought me to a new understanding of life, not just in prison, but in my own life. I have acquired the concrete



knowledge of the true workings of the system, and at the same time come to realize my own captors in life. (Sarah C., Temple participant)

Yes, prisons come in different shapes and sizes. Fundamentally, we hold ourselves captive as we hold one another captive. But there is another choice. We can strive towards creating a society that includes rather than isolating, liberates rather than oppressing. The more that we each feel a sense of internal freedom—and encourage the same in others, the less anyone’s freedom will need to be taken away through incarceration.

Deep within the confines of the prison, there is a magnificent mural leading to a mosque. Access to the mosque is restricted; for whatever reason, the institution decided to lock the mural away—similar to the spirit of the prisoners. I would have never expected such beauty from a desolate place. There is a mural within every person. ...During a class tour of [the prison], we saw how institutional life suppresses the human spirit and hides the true beauty in us all. Looking down the cellblock, one would never know that there were hundreds of people behind the locked doors. The beauty of the artwork at the mosque is kept locked away for no one to see. The beauty within the prisoners is kept locked away for no one to see. Inside-Out opens the door to that beauty... (David, Temple participant)

### **A Literacy of Transformation**

Over the years, I have watched as the same sights, sounds, and smells that invaded my senses and began my own prison sojourn years ago profoundly affect my students. The gate slams shut, the key turns in the lock, and suddenly, we are in a world that is no longer comfortable or predictable. But what we do have is our experience, and what we then come to understand through reflecting on it and studying it. This is the kind of learning that changes lives: it disturbs where we are comfortable, challenges what we thought we knew.

Every week I get more frustrated. ...I am ready to act. I tell as many people whose ear I can catch about the prison. ...I expected to become frustrated and I actually looked forward to it. What I did not fully expect was how heightened my awareness would become. ...I feel like everyone should be able to see what I see. I guess this increased sensitivity is the best thing that could have ever happened to me. (Sarah S., Temple participant)

What do we learn? Wwe learn about crime and how it’s addressed. But we go beyond the simple, if unassailable, reality that crime is a problem. We come to see crime as a symptom of a much deeper social illness—a societal dysfunction in which all of us, by omission or commission, play a part. This is what I want my students to understand. I want them to analyze what they see and question it all: who is locked up and why, how these decisions are made, what prisons are really about, and what each of us can do to change the situation.

The incarcerated students have the opportunity to place their particular experiences with the criminal justice system in a larger context. This leads to a fuller understanding of how society functions, how the system operates, and the effect of these forces on one's life and choices. Those who have been demonized, and consequently demoralized, by a fear-filled, retributive society, are—in this setting—treated with the respect and dignity they deserve as human beings. Based on both written and oral reactions to the experience, it is clear that this course is both empowering and healing for the classmates on the inside.

Inside-Out has changed me so much; it showed me what life is about. In the eight years that I've been incarcerated, I've never felt so strong about wanting to make a change. (Maalik, Graterford participant)

After nearly two decades of going in and out of prison several times a week, I have become acutely aware of how information about crime and justice is gleaned from the media through biased and politicized reports. The complexity of policies cannot be accurately grasped through these sources; in fact, the faulty images of prisons and of the men and women locked inside have a devastating impact on the way our society understands crime and justice.

Inside-Out provides an opportunity to put a human face on a problem that can be kept simplified only if it remains faceless. The ability not only to look at issues in complex ways, but to recognize the complexity in ourselves and others, obviates our propensity for knee-jerk reactions. Stretching beyond our simplistic assumptions will, in time, produce a growing transformation in public thought. By exploring theoretical concepts inside the prison, theory is moved out of the purely mental sphere to a more powerful level—as the mind is engaged, so is the heart. If how we feel, to some extent, drives what we think, herein lies the crux of the transformative potential of this program.

Developing an appreciation for the gravity of what is at stake, those involved become inspired to learn as much as possible in order to make a difference in the injustices they see. The program motivates participants to generate new ideas and fresh solutions—all focused on making change, whether in individuals' lives or in the attitude of the public.

This class is not just a course at Temple for simply three credits and a grade. This is my life and the lives of others. Inside-Out does not stop here. I am ready to forge onward, and make my contributions to the reform of the criminal justice system." (Eula, Temple participant)

The distinct form of literacy that ensues from a service learning experience—wherever it is practiced—has the power to turn things inside-out and upside-down for participants. It provokes one to think differently about the world, and consider one's relationship to the world in a new way. Service learning involves a critique of social systems, challenging participants to analyze what they observe, while inspiring them to take action and make change. Thus, service

learning provides both an incubator for and impetus toward social change.

We now carry the torch! We can provide a voice for those who can't speak, a battle for those unable to fight. (Abdul, Graterford participant)

Transformative experiences radically shift how we see things—the lens through which we previously had viewed reality is irrevocably altered. It is not just about looking at issues from another angle; often, an experience of this kind completely changes the perspective from which one now sees all of life.

So, we continue to go behind the walls—to become ever more literate about crime and justice from the inside, out. And as we do, the walls grow increasingly permeable. Thus, the silence and inertia—those hallmarks of life on the inside—give way to transformative power, hopefully turning our lives—as individuals and as a society—inside-out in the process.<sup>2</sup>

### Notes

1. Although in the past the incarcerated students have not received college credit for this linked course, for many, the course has served to reawaken an interest in continuing their education. We are in the process of developing a support system for those who wish to begin taking college classes upon their release. The incarcerated students are now given the option of being graded, and for those who opt to do so, we offer credit and a grade upon their matriculation at Temple.

2. This summer, thanks to the support of a Soros Justice Senior Fellowship, interested instructors can receive week long training in Inside-Out. The first session will be held July 13-19, 2004 in Philadelphia. Follow-up to this training will include ongoing consultation and support. Contact [www.temple.edu/inside-out](http://www.temple.edu/inside-out) or [inout@temple.edu](mailto:inout@temple.edu) (215.204.2283).

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