


# One Brick at a Time: The Power and Possibility of Dialogue Across the Prison Wall

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What you are about to read is a short version of a story that spans 15 years. It is the most straightforward way to introduce you to The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the subject of this issue of *The Prison Journal*. Though there are many details unable to be addressed in such an introductory piece, it is hoped that this narrative will provide an adequate understanding of the history, context, and philosophical underpinnings of the program.

The story begins when I first set foot in prison back in 1985. 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. The sense that I got was that, underneath the noise and chaos, lay silence and inertia—revealing a depth of isolation that defied imagination. It was deeply disturbing and the feeling is as palpable today as it was then.

Something about that experience compelled me to continue going back in—several days a week—in various capacities over the next few years. I met thousands of incarcerated men and women . . . and the questions—and the disturbance—only grew wider and deeper. I was trying to figure out what this was all about—what our approaches to and levels of imprisonment meant in terms of our social psyche. It was a mystery to me how the richest, strongest,

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freest country on earth could also have the most people incarcerated, in both relative and absolute terms. I came to understand, over time, that our overuse of incarceration is, at least in part, a result of the many systems of injustice that ultimately come to roost in the prison system.

Rather unexpectedly, in 1992, I was offered the opportunity to start teaching some courses in corrections at Temple University in Philadelphia. So, I took my students—more than 10,000 of them over the years—to visit jails and prisons in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. Not surprisingly, I saw, registered on their faces, the same confusion and disturbance that I felt my first day inside the walls. Then, in 1995, something quite extraordinary happened on one of these trips. I took some students to a state prison in Dallas, PA, three hours away from campus. We did the usual tour of the facility, followed by a conversation with a panel of men serving life there. The conversation was remarkable and went places that I had never experienced before—in prison, on campus—really, anywhere. We talked of crime and justice, race and class, politics and economics—and how all of these strands were inter-related. It was fascinating that the entire conversation, complex and nuanced as it was, took place in less than an hour.

After the session was over, one of the men from the panel—a gentleman named Paul—asked if I had ever considered doing this over a whole semester—as a class. His suggestion was that we could travel there once a week, read books, write papers, and have these kinds of dialogues together in a sustained way over a 15-week semester. I thought it was an intriguing idea and, while we could not do it at his institution, since it was so far away, I promised him that I would think about it. And, of course, that was actually *all* I could think about over the next few weeks.

I immediately developed a syllabus for this course, along with a different approach to the learning process, and a name: “The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program: Exploring Issues of Crime and Justice Behind the Walls.” The next step was to find a facility to host the course. My first choice was the State Correctional Institution at Graterford, a very large maximum-security facility, about an hour outside of Philadelphia. Since I had been involved in many programs at that prison over the years, I had some good connections there. Ironically, as I was about to approach the administration about this idea, there was a raid on the institution, which resulted in its being closed to all outside people and programs for a very long time.

I watched and waited—for many months—to see when Graterford would open up again, but there was little movement in that regard. So, after a year or so, I decided to approach the Philadelphia Prison System (a very large county jail complex, housing thousands of people) and asked if they would be

willing to give this idea a try, as a pilot program. I had no idea if it would work. As it happened, with that first Inside-Out class in the Fall of 1997, the experience greatly exceeded my expectations.

Just to be clear at this juncture, Inside-Out is not a situation where those of us from the outside are going into the prison to study the men or women inside; it is neither research nor voyeurism. We are also not “helping” the participants who are incarcerated; it is not charity or service of any kind. Though some instructors may choose to frame an Inside-Out course as a “service learning” experience, we approach Inside-Out as, more appropriately, a “community-based learning” opportunity, through which everyone involved is seen as having something vital to offer in the learning process.

Additionally, Inside-Out is not involved in advocacy or activism—the program is not promoting any particular agenda. It is an educational program—nothing more, nothing less. And, finally, the program does not encourage the development of relationships that would exceed the boundaries of the classroom. “Inside” and “outside” students use only first names, share no other identifying information about themselves, and have no contact beyond the classroom. The program has very clear parameters that help to keep it safe on many levels—for participants, as well as for the program as a whole.

In order to provide a sense of what happens in an Inside-Out class, picture the following: A group of, on average, 15 campus-based college/university students and 15 men or women in a correctional facility come together each week to study about crime, justice, and related issues. In a room deep inside a jail or prison, 30 people gather each week in a large circle, alternately seated—inside student, outside student, inside, outside—around the circle. In that circle, everyone is equal—with an equal voice and an equal stake in the learning process. Everyone does the same reading and writing, and the focus of the educational methodology is on dialogue. The instructor serves as a facilitator, encouraging ongoing dialogue and collaborative work throughout the semester in the large group, as well as in smaller subgroups. Here is how one student described the experience:

What a motley crew we made in that little program room at [the prison]. I often think about the incredible dynamic of our group and wonder what we must look like to the people outside that room. People of different colors, sexes, ages, education levels, social classes and opinions in a circle, laughing, talking, arguing and respecting each other for hours at a time. It has to make it difficult for anyone who watches to hold on to the status quo. The status quo says that doesn't happen. It says that people are different and that some things are never

going to change. For two and a half hours [each week] this semester, we proved that untrue. (Outside student)

During my first Inside-Out class, I discovered, to my great surprise, that something quite unexpected was happening: besides learning about crime and justice, the people involved in the class were coming to new understandings of themselves, of others, of society, and of their relationship to society. What occurred in this course was so incredible that I just kept offering it every semester.

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 students in the class gave it life—we taught each other more than can be read in a book. (Outside participant)

In 2002, after having taught Inside-Out courses in the Philadelphia system for 5 years, I received the approval to expand the program to Graterford Prison, the maximum-security prison where I had originally hoped to offer these classes. In the process of taking the first steps to get the program started, I received an astonishing letter from someone incarcerated there. Essentially, the letter went as follows: “I heard about the program that you are bringing here to the institution and we are all very excited about it. In fact, I am going to be helping to get the program started here with some of the other men who are part of the Lifers Association.” And then, there was this jaw-dropping line: “You may remember me. I met you at Dallas. My name is Paul.” I was stunned! Here, the man with the original idea that became Inside-Out had been transferred to Graterford! Who knew? So, not only did Paul discover that his germ of an idea had taken root in the world, but he was able to help get it started at Graterford and has been (and continues to be, to this day) involved in everything that has happened since then.

The first class at Graterford was so charged and on fire about the issues discussed in the course that the group decided to stay together to do a series of projects focused on re-educating the public about crime and justice. The group called itself the “Think Tank” and has been meeting weekly ever since (as of this writing, the Think Tank has met each week for 10 years, without interruption). One of the first decisions the group made back in 2002 was to work on developing Inside-Out into a national model, which became possible through a fellowship from the Soros Foundation. After several months of preparation, we held our first National Instructor Training Institute in July of 2004—a 7-day, 60-hour intensive training—two days of which were held

inside Graterford Prison with a group of men who had been “inside students” in the program. On those days of the training, the men assisted in training the instructors, offering their expert assistance and advice on multiple dimensions of Inside-Out’s best practices.

These trainings have become a core function of our program. Given the complexity of what happens in an Inside-Out class, we find it crucial for instructors interested in taking on this challenge to participate in a comprehensive training institute. The weeklong program covers the full gamut of issues required for one to be adequately prepared to facilitate these blended classes. Some of the topics include garnering support both from one’s educational institution and the local correctional institution, ethical concerns that may arise in this work, identity and diversity issues in need of consideration, facilitation techniques, understanding the context and rules of the prison, and much more. After the training, our staff remains available to instructors for further consultation as they set up their classes.

As of August 2012, we have offered 26 trainings, involving 374 college instructors from throughout the United States, Canada, and beyond. More than 400 Inside-Out courses have been offered in 25 states and two Canadian provinces to date, involving approximately 12,000 inside and outside students. Classes are in disciplines as diverse as sociology, theatre, economics, urban planning, and yoga—spanning the social sciences, the humanities, and the arts. A number of law schools have begun classes, as well. Courses are conducted by every size and type of higher educational institution (e.g. major research institutions, small liberal arts colleges, community colleges) and correctional facility (e.g. minimum, medium, and maximum-security facilities for men, women and, to a limited extent, young people in juvenile detention—located in rural, urban, and suburban areas).

The Inside-Out program is growing exponentially, both in depth and in breadth—in part, because it is a groundbreaking, cutting-edge approach to education. We understand the learning process as much more than something that happens “from the eyebrows up.” Education that is worthy of the name has to involve the whole person to whatever extent possible. Given that the root of the word education means to “draw out,” this unique pedagogical approach—centered in the dialogic process—honors what education, in its deepest sense, can be—the drawing out of the best in those gathered: the best ideas, the best critical thinking and, frankly, the best of what it means to be a human being.

My brain never stopped processing information as each student was able to add a piece to the steadily growing mosaic. For me, this is what

a college class is all about. I left class with my mind racing to place all of the pieces discussed into their proper places. (Inside student)

The experience has highlighted the transformative value to students of combining intellectual, emotional and experiential learning. I have expanded my capacities and deepened my knowledge as an instructor and as a human being. (Inside-Out instructor)

There is something both powerful and compelling about what happens within the prison classroom—for the inside students, for the outside students, and for the instructor, as well. It is an interesting, albeit ironic, twist that we are able to create a space of freedom within a context that is often the antithesis. In this shared space, we can be who we are, say what we know, and call forth the best in each other. Many inside students have even expressed that, while in the class, they actually forget that they are in prison. It is interesting that, when instructors contact us after holding their first course, the description is remarkably similar. It is, they say, a deeply transformative experience. Assumptions are debunked . . . worldviews are shattered . . . and participants begin to look at themselves, their lives, and the world in whole new 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. (Outside student)

We describe Inside-Out in terms of bringing about social change through transformative education. It is our ongoing experience that people really *do* begin to see themselves as potential change agents—as being able to make a difference in the world. For many of the incarcerated students, it provides a radical change from seeing oneself (or being seen) as the problem—to seeing oneself as part of the *solution* to the problem. In fact, we all come to see ourselves that way.

I will hold its ideals and values for the rest of my life—but not only to keep them with me but to act consciously with them. (Inside student)

So, on one level, Inside-Out is a college class—though, obviously, not an ordinary one. In these classes, roles are intermingled: everyone is the teacher, everyone is the learner. The process of investigation and discovery is both communal and collaborative. We explore together, we grapple together, we

create new knowledge together—and we challenge one another to always go deeper in our explorations.

At the same time, in the most unlikely of settings, Inside-Out provides a space of liberation, a place in which each person is afforded dignity and recognized for the unique contribution that he or she brings to the whole. In the face of the many forms of imprisonment that we all bear in our lives—some internal, some external—this experience offers to everyone involved an intimation of freedom.

In our wider social reality, Inside-Out is about walls—walls of our own making, as well as walls constructed by others. Some of these walls are made of bricks—but *all* are held in place by the mortar of fear and ignorance. We fear what we don't know—in others, in the world, even in ourselves. So, we build walls, thinking we can keep ourselves safe from whatever we imagine is threatening us. It is a dangerous delusion.

This makes me think of Tyrone Werts, whose life sentence was commuted after 36½ years of incarceration. One day several years ago, during a meeting inside Graterford, Tyrone looked out the window of the room where we were gathered, and said: “That wall isn't there just to keep me in, but to keep you out.” Without realizing it, he was illustrating—simply and profoundly—one of the most fundamental reasons that we do what we do in this program.

Inside-Out moves beyond the walls that separate us. In a more literal sense, it moves, actually, *through* the walls. It is an exchange, an engagement—between and among people who live on both sides of the prison wall. And it is through this exchange, realized in the crucible of dialogue, that separate us from each other - and sometimes, from ourselves—begin to crumble. The hope is that, in time, through this exchange, these walls—between us, around us, and within us—will become increasingly permeable and, eventually, extinct—one idea, one person, one brick at a time. All of our lives depend on it.

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## **Author Biography**

**Lori Pompa** has been going in and out of prisons and jails since 1985. She has been on the faculty of the Department of Criminal Justice at Temple University since 1993, and is Founder and Director of The Inside-Out Center at Temple University, the International Headquarters of The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Beginning in 1997, Inside-Out has been creating opportunities for social change through transformative education, involving individuals inside and outside of correctional facilities working together through dialogue and collaborative problem solving in classrooms behind prison walls. As a 2003 Soros Justice Senior Fellow, she collaborated with others on both sides of the prison wall to develop Inside-Out into a national (now international) model of transformative pedagogy. To date, 374 instructors from 200+ colleges and universities in 37 states and abroad have taken part in the intensive, week-long Inside-Out training, with more than 400 Inside-Out classes offered so far (involving 12,000+ students) and scores of classes conducted throughout North America each semester. Classes are offered in disciplines spanning the social sciences, the arts, and the humanities - in prisons and jails throughout the U.S. and Canada. Since beginning at Temple, she has taught approximately 120 courses, predominantly in the area of corrections, and employs an experiential learning methodology in all of her teaching. She has taken many more than 12,000 students into prisons, jails, and other correctional facilities, through tours and other exchanges. In addition to her work with this program, Lori Pompa is considered an expert in correctional issues, race and racism, hands-on experiential learning, and civic engagement, and served as Director of Temple's College of Liberal Arts' Office of Experiential Learning.