




# When Prison Is the Classroom: Collaborative Learning about Urban Inequality

Journal of Planning Education and Research  
2020, Vol. 40(2) 186–195  
© The Author(s) 2017  
Article reuse guidelines:  
sagepub.com/journals-permissions  
DOI: 10.1177/0739456X17734048  
journals.sagepub.com/home/jpe  


Justin Steil<sup>1</sup> and Aditi Mehta<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article analyzes the pedagogy of an urban sociology course taught in prison, with both outside and imprisoned students. The course examined the production of knowledge used in the field of planning and sought to facilitate the coproduction of new insights about urban inequality. Participant observation, focus groups, and students' written reflections reveal that, in comparison to traditional classroom settings, students explored with greater complexity their embodiment of multiple social identities, wrestled more deeply with the structural embeddedness of individual agency, and situated their personal experiences in a broader theoretical narrative about urban inequality. Building trust in the face of significant power disparities within the classroom was essential to learning. The findings highlight the importance of new locations of learning that enable classrooms to become contact zones, pushing students to collaboratively reimagine justice in the city with those outside the traditional classroom.

## Keywords

planning education, urban inequality, sociology of knowledge, prisons

## Introduction

As in other academic fields, those privileged to produce knowledge about urban planning are primarily individuals who have had access to elite academic training and credentials (Sandercock and Attili 2010; Appadurai 2006). Accordingly, the explanations that the planning academy produces of our social world may be incomplete, because they are shaped by a limited set of experiences. In a field focused on the relation of knowledge to action, such as urban planning, it is particularly important to ask who is engaged in planning action as compared to who is acted upon, and to appreciate that those acted upon are producers of knowledge and theory as well (Brand 2015; Young 2002; Umemoto 2001; Freire [1970] 1993). Power, as Foucault (1980) noted, produces and reproduces knowledge by shaping what questions are asked and which ones are left unasked.

For example, well-intentioned planners have razed vibrant working-class neighborhoods because they were seen as blighted slums and developed highways through the heart of thriving Black, Latino, and Asian American communities (Avila 2014; Gotham 1999; Thomas and Ritzdorf 1997; Gans 1962). These failures of urban planning suggest the need to broaden the sources of knowledge on which planning theory and practice draw. For planning education, one aspect of this broadening requires developing students' capacity to effectively analyze the social processes that contribute to

inequality. For planning scholarship, this broadening requires expanding the starting places from which knowledge about planning is produced so that scholarship more accurately represents the diversity of urban experiences.

To create a learning environment that expands the sources of knowledge production in planning and that engages with a broader range of perspectives on inequality than the typical classroom, the authors taught an urban sociology class inside a medium-security men's prison with a combination of imprisoned and nonimprisoned university students. Scholarship about planning pedagogy highlights the role of studios (Long 2012; Németh and Long 2012; Sletto 2012), fieldwork (Johnston 2015), and community partnerships (Sletto 2010; Dewar and Isaac 1998) in making planning education more participatory, but we are not aware of any articles that focus on the prison context. As a consequence of their convictions, incarcerated individuals (and former prisoners) are explicitly excluded from many civil and political rights that are often taken for granted,

---

Initial submission, December 2016; revised submission, June 2017; final acceptance, September 2017

<sup>1</sup>Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Justin Steil, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 77 Massachusetts Avenue, Room 9-515, Cambridge, MA 02139, USA.  
Email: steil@mit.edu

and are pushed to the social and spatial margins of our society. This course aimed to create space for prisoners to have a voice in the analytical engagement with the realities of the city that planning practitioners face in their work. In the class, we sought to create an environment in which multiple conflicting viewpoints could be raised and participants could engage with the divergent epistemological paradigms in the room. We approached the class from the starting point that “education can only be liberatory when everyone claims knowledge as a field in which we all labor” (hooks 1994, 14).

## Prisons and Planning Education

Despite the significant role of the criminal justice and penal systems in shaping the built environment of cities and the lives of urban residents, they have not been a primary focus of urban planning research or education. Like most social phenomena, violence and imprisonment have a notable spatial structure (Steil, De la Roca, and Ellen 2015). The spatial concentration of neighborhoods from which prisoners are taken is both dramatic and durable. In many communities, criminal justice agencies are the primary government actors interacting with residents, and spending on police and prisons is the largest public expenditure in that neighborhood. For instance, more than \$1 million annually is spent per block on imprisoning the residents of 35 different blocks in New York City (Cadora and Kurgan 2006). In Chicago, a cluster of neighborhoods in the near-west and south-central parts of the city have imprisonment rates eight times greater than the rest of the city, a pattern of spatial disparities that has persisted for decades (Sampson and Loeffler 2010). How the spatial and social structure of cities contribute to these wide disparities in imprisonment is an important question for planning practice and research.

One way to explore these relationships between neighborhoods and inequality is to study social stratification through the lens of urban sociology together in prison with imprisoned and nonimprisoned students. Such a format allows participants to analyze spatial statistics and social phenomena together, drawing from students’ diverse backgrounds and geographic, as well as figurative, life paths. This article first describes the setting, rationale, and structure of the course. It then explains three aspects of the learning process that emerged from this approach to teaching in the prison context: (1) a heightened awareness of students’ positionality in relation to each other and to broader society; (2) a particularly nuanced discussion of the interaction of social structure and personal agency in cities; and (3) the self-reflective fusion of personal experience with urban theory.

Every Friday, twelve “outside” students (ten master’s and two doctoral candidates, all in urban planning) traveled to attend class in a prison with twelve “inside” students (imprisoned there and simultaneously bachelor’s-degree candidates in liberal arts).<sup>1</sup> The imprisoned<sup>2</sup> students were serving a range of sentences, from five years to life without parole. The

location and composition of the class was chosen based on the belief that bringing together outside students with inside imprisoned students of urban issues creates a valuable environment to generate new knowledge about our social world and the repeated mechanisms that contribute to persistent socioeconomic inequality. Conducting the class in this way generated new insights into sociological theory by more directly confronting the structural inequality the course sought to understand (Wu 2010). We saw our class as a “contact zone” or a social space where multiple experiences and cultures clash, struggle, and blend with each other (Fine and Torre 2004; Pratt 1991). When classrooms are contact zones, the interactions and relationships among students become part of the textured lessons themselves as we pay attention to “the improvisational elements of power differences, emphasizing how subjects are constituted in and by their relation to one another” (Torre and Fine 2004, 19). The outside students were challenged to learn in an environment where the rules, both written and unwritten, were foreign to them and where they felt neither familiar with nor entitled to the space. The imprisoned students were similarly pushed to learn in a classroom environment alongside peers with a more traditional educational trajectory. We observed three parallel educations taking place—an introduction to theories of urban sociology for all of the students, an informal introduction to the lived experiences of the criminal justice system for the outside students, and an opportunity for imprisoned students to thrive in a more traditional educational setting.<sup>3</sup> As educator Earl Shorris (2013) argued, exposure to the social sciences and humanities helps people to reflect on their surroundings and place them in a wider social context. Several of the imprisoned students reflected on the irony that outside of prison, they might not have participated in an elite university course, given the social and educational contexts from which they had come.

A risk of the course was the possibility that outside students might enroll to satiate a curiosity about an unknown, “forbidden” environment. The purpose of the course was not to study prisons, prisoners, or even criminal justice explicitly. We recognized that a valuable part of the learning experience for all of the students in the class was our respective positions in relation to the carceral system, but wanted to ensure that in no way would the outside students see themselves as “studying” their imprisoned peers. The aim was to facilitate an environment in which the discussion of differences emerged organically from the sociological analysis of inequality and one that highlighted discussions of the reproduction of power and privilege as much as the reproduction of poverty. The instructors required students to take on, explore, and critique positions that were not their own through collaborative class assignments designed to prevent students from becoming entrenched only in their own perspectives. For instance, using Wellman’s (1979) and Brint’s (2001) articles about community, there was a lively debate with assigned positions about whether community had been

lost, saved, or liberated by urbanization and transformations in communications technologies.

The outside students included three men and nine women, of which two were Latina, two were South Asian, two were Asian, one was mixed race, and five were white. Their ages ranged from twenty-three to thirty-three. The imprisoned students were all male and four were Black, four were Latino and four were White. Their ages ranged from twenty-five to sixty. The instructors were both in their thirties. One was a white man and the other a South Asian woman. A conscious effort was made in assembling the teaching team to ensure that it included at the very least both a man and woman, and was not all white in recognition of the reality that students might have varying levels of comfort approaching the instructors about sensitive issues shaped by the positionality of the instructors.

The gender, age, and racial or ethnic composition of the class members was just one small difference among many between the two groups of participants. Of course, the most obvious distinction was that one set of students' future options were epitomized by their pursuit of postgraduate degrees while the other group of students' lives were marked by the limitations that having a criminal conviction imposes on future options, even in spite of their own pursuit of a college degree while in prison. We worked to create as equal a classroom space as possible for all students, and emphasized the importance of each participant's situated knowledge, which is information one possesses defined by personal life experiences. We recognized that situated "knowledge is located, produced, silenced, and amplified in varied sites within an institution" be it prison or a university (Fine and Torre 2004, 19).

## **Purpose and Assessment of Pedagogy**

This article offers a detailed pedagogical account of this unique classroom experience and provides a critical discussion of the course's learning objectives. Inspired by Brooks and Wu's (2012) approach to pedagogical articles in the field of planning, we aim to answer the following research questions: (1) what did this urban sociology course in prison aim to accomplish? (2) What are the elements of this course that distinguish it from similar experiences elsewhere? and (3) How did we evaluate the course's goals and what did we as educators learn from this?

We draw from several forms of data to reflect on our own pedagogy, to assess the students' outcomes, and to offer a rigorous assessment of the course. One of the authors (the teaching assistant for the course) conducted ethnographic participant observation of each class session, and documented the discussions and group dynamics through detailed handwritten notes. Using emergent coding, we identified themes from classroom discussion that were repeated across the weeks. Additionally, every student was required to submit a

seven-hundred-word weekly response paper about the reading assignments. These brief essays allowed us to track how students' ideas and opinions were changing (or not) over the course of the class.

At the midterm point, we assigned students a reflection paper with the following prompt:

How, if at all, has your understanding of inequality changed thus far through the course? How, if at all, has this learning environment enhanced your understanding of key sociological readings? Please draw on the readings and your class lecture notes as you write this essay.

We used these reflection papers to evaluate the intended learning outcomes of the course—offering a rigorous introduction to urban sociology that examines both the reproduction of power as well as the reproduction of poverty. We also hosted three focus groups with the outside university students—one before the course began, one during the midterm period, and one at the end of class—to better understand their experience in the class. Similarly, we hosted two focus groups with the imprisoned students—one before the course began and one at the end—to gather feedback on the semester.

The authors of this article reflected on their prior teaching and classroom experiences in more traditional academic classrooms to frame and make sense of outcomes. Throughout the course, the authors aimed to make the research and assessment process as transparent as possible. During the first class, we informed all participants that we planned to write an article about the learning environment of the course and that we would document class discussions and analyze their written work to that end. We checked the usage of quotes with students whom we reference. In focus groups, we also presented our outline of the manuscript and invited student critique and feedback, which are reflected in the article.

## **The Approach**

The seminar introduced students to core writings in the field of urban sociology with a critical lens on the production of that knowledge. Topics included the relationship between neighborhood characteristics and individual outcomes, the significance of social networks, changing conceptions of "community," the drivers of categorical inequality, and the interaction of social structure and political power. We examined several of the key theoretical paradigms that have shaped sociology since its founding, explored how and why they have changed over time, and discussed the implications of these shifts for urban planning practice. The course empowered students with a critical appreciation of the contexts in which planning skills are applied, and it introduced a "sociology of knowledge" approach to understanding the development of planning theory and expertise.

### Theory and Content: Sociology of Knowledge

Sociological research about inequality is a product of its time and place. The syllabus intentionally juxtaposed classic readings with contributions by authors often excluded from the canon. From the foundations of sociological thought to Du Bois's conception of double consciousness, from the ecological models of the Chicago School to more contemporary neighborhood effects research, we sought to demonstrate how sociological scholarship analyzes categorical disparities differently depending on the larger social, political, and economic context in which the research and the researcher are embedded.

For example, we assigned Wirth's (1938) "Urbanism as a Way of Life," Gans's (1962) response "Urbanism and Suburbanism as a Way of Life," and Fischer's (1975) "Towards a Subcultural Theory of Urbanism," alongside excerpts from Kelley's (2001) book *Yo Mama's Disfunktional: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. We studied Gans's argument that differences in ways of life between urban and suburban dwellers can be attributed to class and life-cycle rather than the Wirthian processes related to density, heterogeneity, and size. We explored Fischer's contributions to our understanding of urban dynamics in recognizing that "unconventionality" or distinctive subcultures arise out of these same Wirthian processes. At the same time, we engaged with Kelley's critique of how subcultures are misunderstood in social science writing that takes for granted dominant norms. Kelley specifically challenges narratives about the "underclass," pointing to how the decline in employment opportunities, lack of public space or programs for young people, and underfunded public schools expanded an urban landscape where black teenagers were stereotyped as engaging in "play" instead of "work" by white society. He argues that in this "play," of basketball or graffiti, one can see an ethic of hard work that evidences a hope of upward mobility (Kelley 2001).

Building on this exploration of the sociology of knowledge in urban studies, one of the goals of the course was to consider the power of social science research in shaping planning practice and to examine the prerequisites seen as necessary for producing sociological knowledge. As several students, both imprisoned and outside, noted toward the end of the semester, scholars of urban inequality have a complicated job—they try to understand differences within and among groups, but in doing so run the risk of further cementing particular categories in the popular imagination and in policy analysis. As reflective educators, we tried to avoid such categorization when analyzing the experiences and outcomes of outside versus imprisoned students in the course.

### Assignments and Teaching

A primary focus in designing this course was integrating the two groups of students, and creating a space in which

everyone felt that they had something to contribute and to learn. The course attracted socially aware and collaborative individuals from both institutions, making a discussion-based, collaborative learning environment rewarding. Initially, several of the imprisoned participants emphasized their concern that the outside students would see them only as prisoners and not as fellow students. We knew at the outset that an early challenge would be establishing trust among the class members based on an appreciation of each student as an individual and a fellow learner.

*Photo icebreaker.* We began the first class by distributing two sets of twelve photographs to the outside and imprisoned students. Through the photos, each outside student was thus partnered with an imprisoned student who received a matching image. We asked the pairs to scrutinize their pictures together, to identify the social processes at work in the photograph, and to report back to their classmates. The photographs represented themes that we would cover throughout the semester, including the societal implications of industrialization and deindustrialization; the dynamics of urban political power; and racial, ethnic, and gender identities among others. One image from the late 1890s depicted crowded storefronts in an immigrant neighborhood. An imprisoned student quickly identified with the picture and told the class it looked like the immigrant neighborhood where he grew up and used to live, leading him to ask questions about what constitutes "community" and the processes of neighborhood change. Another photograph showed a 1990s suburban development with African American children playing in a backyard. The partners assigned to this image asked questions about the influence of suburban real estate development on race and class relations, which we further explored in the week dedicated to urban politics.

The photos also helped the students to begin thinking about knowledge production and positionality. One 1920s photograph showed ten white male photojournalists from the *Chicago Tribune* standing in a row, which prompted a discussion about who gets to decide the facts and shape historical narrative. Two other photographs captured playground recreation in New York's Chinatown and grieving at a wake in the aftermath of gang violence in East LA, which spurred commentary about the dynamics involved when researching communities different from one's own. The images not only served as a starting point for conversation between strangers from different spaces, but also began to facilitate the co-production of knowledge within the room.

*Weekly Presentations and Collaboration.* Several of the assignments involved outside and imprisoned student collaboration. Each week, an outside student and an imprisoned student would present the assigned readings to the class, connect these readings to a current event, and lead a ten-minute discussion about that relationship. Since the two sets of students could not communicate between meetings, these

presentations were prepared throughout the weeks in advance during the ten-minute breaks in the middle of each three-hour class, further building rapport between the two groups.

In one of the introductory classes, where we covered the foundations of sociological thought including Durkheim, Marx, Weber, and C. Wright Mills, the student presenters used Mills's *Sociological Imagination* to make sense of today's opioid crisis. Inspired by Mills's (1959, 3) statement that "neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both," the student team asked their classmates, "How has the opioid crisis moved from a personal trouble to a societal concern?" The imprisoned student presenter described how he watched the opioid crisis take over his own neighborhood, and was socialized to believe that the addicts he encountered were unmotivated. He drew from Marx to explore how an individual's perception of the world is shaped by economic class. Before being arrested, he had seen the crisis primarily as an opportunity to make money, but he realized while in prison that the addiction crisis occurred not because such a large majority of individuals in his community suffered from character flaws but because they all faced similar societal challenges around access to opportunity. The outside student shared how she was sheltered from drug-use in her immigrant suburb of Los Angeles, and drew on Durkheim's conception of mechanical and organic solidarities, asking, "What types of solidarities do we see emerge in society in the handling of the opioid crisis?" Together the two presenters then outlined a brief history of drug use, addiction, and policy in the United States and engaged their colleagues in a productive conversation relating the readings to this timely issue.

Exploring the concept of community and how to analyze it, we studied Simmel's (1950) essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," Tönnies's (1887) description of *gemeinschaft* and *gesellschaft*, as well as Wellman's (1979) article "The Community Question: The Intimate Networks of East Yorkers." The student presenters were struck by the recognition that community cannot only support human flourishing but also limit human freedom. The presenters used the readings about community to analyze the 2016 presidential campaigns and asked their classmates, "How do these different perspectives on community explain the rise of Donald Trump?" Participants discussed how identity, fear, exclusion, and a sense of inclusion played a role in the candidate's popularity.

Another student presentation used Du Bois's idea of double consciousness to interpret Beyoncé's 2016 Superbowl performance. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois (1903) famously describes double consciousness:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts,

two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.

The presenters asked their classmates how Du Bois would interpret Beyoncé's *Formation* performance during the half-time show. The conversation that followed explored the commodification of blackness and drew on Du Bois's changing approaches to the struggle for racial justice regarding the role of economic advancement in achieving liberation. One student asked in his midterm reflection:

Should Beyoncé, as a wealthy icon of the often exploitative global music industry, be taken seriously on issues such as police brutality and racial inequality in America? When Beyoncé sings, "You just might be a black Bill Gates in the making, cause I slay/ I just might be a black Bill Gates in the making/ I see it, I want it, I stunt, yellow-bone it/ I dream it, I work hard, I grind 'til I own it," it raises the question of whether capitalism can be an emancipatory pathway for racial minorities or whether capitalism is deeply implicated in the production of racial injustice in America?

These questions highlight the constant conversation between historic texts in sociological theory and pressing contemporary questions about power, inequality, and self-determination.

Several student presenters also highlighted how sociological research could help us develop and analyze concrete policies. For example, in the week that covered social capital and social networks, the student presenters structured a debate around a voluntary local busing program through which pupils from urban public schools are bussed to schools in suburban neighborhoods. Drawing from Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), Lin (1999), and Burt (2004), they asked their classmates to brainstorm four positions on the program: (1) the busing program builds individual social capital; (2) the busing program decreases individual social capital; (3) the busing program strengthens communities' social networks; and (4) the busing program weakens communities' social networks. Through the debate, students borrowed from their own schooling experiences to evaluate the theories presented in the readings and the busing program. While some participants attended urban or suburban public schools close to their home, others traveled far to private preparatory schools. Some individuals attended schools with bussed students, while others were themselves bussed. Within the classroom, the presenters were able to draw from classmates who had experienced a bussing program firsthand to enrich the debate.

*Midterm assessment and final paper.* A turning point in class discussion occurred midsemester when we asked students to submit a reflection paper about the course. The students gave us permission to share excerpts from their papers with the class. We designed a lecture around the collected thoughts and turned individual insights into shared learning. This

format allowed us to have raw and personal discussions about the experience. The class discussion was explicit about the differences in opportunity between the two groups and how that affects individual lives. Many of the imprisoned students chose to talk more about their experiences in prison as they related to the urban sociology topics of the class. This marked a shift from the beginning of the course when the imprisoned students wished to leave behind their identity as prisoners upon entering the classroom. Similarly, outside students began to open up more frankly about their upbringings, experiences, and aspirations. Using excerpts from the response papers to highlight the contribution of each and every student to the development of our collective knowledge helped us make the classroom a democratic setting in which all students felt not just able to, but responsible to, contribute (hooks 1994). Lastly, the 3,500-word final paper was our clearest evidence of learning outcomes for each participant in the course as we assessed whether the student was able to apply sociological lessons to answer a specific research question of his or her choice.

### **Learning Moments and Course Reflection**

Student discussions in this urban sociology course differed from others in classes that we had taught in outside universities in three main ways: (1) the rapid development of students' awareness of their positionality; (2) greater nuance in the analysis of many sociological concepts, and particularly in the classic sociological "structure versus agency" debate; and (3) the different approaches students brought to engaging assigned readings.<sup>4</sup>

#### *Growing Awareness of Positionality*

Bringing these students together for class inside the prison heightened everyone's self-awareness, and both outside and imprisoned students reiterated this self-reflection throughout the course. During one class, an imprisoned student stated that once he completed his degree, he felt it would not be valued in the same way as the outside students' degrees. His criminal record would always color his participation in this "elite" class. For the outside students, in comparison, he felt the semester-long experience in the prison class was another enriching experience and achievement that could be added to a resume or raised in a job interview. As a class, we were repeatedly wrestling with the ways in which our own positions in society reinforce and replicate inequality, even when sharing the same classroom and educational experience.

Planners often discuss the importance of empathy, and of being able to put oneself in another's shoes (Campbell 2012; Umemoto 2001; Forester 1988). These types of cultural competency skills are central to planning education and to professional success in practice (Agyeman and Erickson 2012). The prison context forced students to empathize with

one another, to reflect on their own positionality, and to navigate wide ranges of opinion.

In their midterm reflections, several outside students shared how the readings and class environment helped them challenge their own assumptions and imagine realities beyond their own. For instance, one outside student wrote about the impact of the class on how he conceptualized his own research: "Just as with [Robin] Kelley's reading, [Elijah] Anderson's [1999] writing highlighted the tendency of outsiders to 'flatten' the populations they study and see them as undifferentiated. But more than that, I began to imagine how it must feel to be a 'high-performing' prisoner (as measured by good behavior or other metrics) yet be seen as just another prisoner by outsiders." The unique context of the class made the lessons more personal and took the readings from a theoretical exercise to one that related directly to one's own experience and positionality, as this student demonstrates in his analysis of the classroom.

Another outside student wrote about how the experience of the class combined with the readings changed her conception of community:

On our [first] day at the prison, the administrator told us that [the prison] was a "type of community." . . . I rolled my eyes at his insinuation that the place was anything he described. Just a week later, a student serving a life sentence explained that he was interested in learning what he could from this course because [the prison] was his community, and he wanted to enrich it. I stood corrected. What he said prompted me to think more critically about what community comprises.

The experience of the class more than the readings alone challenged students to consider how communities are created, who has the power to bring them into being, and what meaning and resources they provide, even or especially in conditions characterized by stark inequalities.

The course also prompted intense self-reflection about one's role in the classroom, one's relationship to power, and one's ability to speak up in different contexts. One student reflected on these issues, writing:

Without thinking I said, "This is a not a normal class," to which he [my imprisoned classmate] corrected me and said, "But it is a normal class." Was I at that moment essentializing the experience without even realizing it? It reminded me of some of the micro-aggressions I have experienced in classrooms, but [had] felt [too] powerless or overwhelmed to say something.

Outside students who had often seen themselves disempowered in the university suddenly found themselves comparatively empowered in the sense of being "free" even in a classroom space that was surrounded by the denial of freedom. As the quote suggests, for some of the outside students who had been accustomed to a sense of powerlessness or a feeling of not belonging in elite educational settings, the

classroom created a space to critically analyze that experience from a different position in relation to power in and out of the classroom and thus a new perspective. As Freire has explained, when “we can gain distance on our moment of existence,” we can see more clearly “how we are conditioned by the dominant ideology” and we can then “struggle to become free precisely because we know we are not free” (Shor 1992, 23).

These revelations about power and positionality were not limited to the outside students. The imprisoned students also expressed new realizations about their identity, and how the course helped them to see their own pursuits differently. One student wrote:

There are times I tend to question my academic career, like, “Is this really going to help me when I am released?” and “Is this something I truly want to do or is it something that I am doing to kill time?” Well, in this environment, I have found the answers to some of my questions. I have found that not only do I enjoy and want to better myself through education, but I am surrounded by people who feel the same way. That sense of connection, that humanity, is something that has been missing from my learning experience. This environment has reinforced my sense of purpose, confidence, and energy that is greatly needed to pursue my academic career further.

Both outside students and imprisoned students helped one another explore issues of difference. The immigrant and first-generation American participants (outside and imprisoned) reflected on their own actions that allowed them to fit into American society. Many cited Fanon’s (1964, 38) *Toward the African Revolution* about colonialism: “the racialized social group tries to imitate the oppressor and thereby to deracialize itself.” An outside student explained how she saw this sentiment manifest in her own life: “This took the form of stubbornly refusing to speak in the language of our parents, turning our noses up at the foods that represented generations of history, soaking our hair with chemicals to look as blonde as Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake.” Students contemplated how their own simple, seemingly irrelevant behaviors reinforced racism.

A white imprisoned student grappled with the concept of racism as he described a perception among some that black prison guards treat white prisoners more harshly than their nonwhite counterparts. He shared how he had been sent to solitary confinement by a black guard, and asked his classmates if this was racist. Applying concepts from Omi and Winant (1986) and Bonilla-Silva (1997), he explained that regardless of any personal bias against white people, the guard’s action did not fit into a historical, structural pattern of a “racial project.” The student then explored the extent to which racial categories might or might not transcend the categories of prisoner and guard.

Similarly, power relations were at odds with the usual social structural perspective for outside students too. The single sex nature of the prison and the intense hierarchy of

control produces a space where the gendered dynamics of power and sexuality are particularly sensitive. Women students (several of whom were women of color) observed how their position changed quickly in the journey from the outside to the classroom. They unexpectedly felt powerless in front of female guards who scrutinized their attire each week, in the words of one student, “imply[ing] that we are unable to control our bodies or sexuality,” and then on reaching the classroom, despite being decades younger than many of the men in the classroom, unexpectedly felt an uncomfortable sense of power because of their ability to leave the prison and return to daily life after class.

### *Nuanced Discussion of Structure versus Agency in Cities*

In our prior teaching experiences, we had found that students from outside universities often emphasized the importance of social structures and the overriding influence of larger economic, political, and social forces in determining individual outcomes and actions. As one of the outside students in this class shared in her midterm reflection:

The fruits of the sociological imagination are indeed a “terrible lesson and a magnificent one,” as Mills describes—I come away with a feeling of gaining the “true” explanation, but at the same time, perhaps, with a deeper cynicism about whether or not it is possible for individuals (and entire communities) to swim against the tide.

This excerpt and other sociological theories we studied in the class helped explain the durable social structures that contributed to inequality, but left outside students skeptical about the possibilities for individuals to defy the trajectories that social structures seemed to impose.

This view was challenged by some of the imprisoned students, who underscored the significance of personal responsibility and individual agency in their lives. While several of the outside students felt that advocacy for social justice required an exclusive focus on the power of larger socioeconomic structures, imprisoned students complicated this view by describing how limited and disempowered they felt by the attribution of an individual’s actions simply to social structures. These imprisoned students went on to describe ways in which they had been forced to grapple with their own actions and the consequences of those actions. They found that recognizing the influence of social structures was essential, but so too was the dignity and power they found in the significance of personal choice and agency, both for actions they had already taken and actions they hoped to be able to take in the future. Indeed, to many of the imprisoned students, a focus on individual will in the context of mediating social structures was seen as providing hope for some control over one’s life in the future, when a solely structural perspective emphasized only the limited nature of choices available to

those with felony convictions and long prison sentences. This tension was one that was revisited throughout the semester as the course provided ways to analyze the embeddedness of action (Gould 2003; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Granovetter 1973) and the constant interaction of social structures and individual agency.

Outside students also reframed how they thought about structure and agency with regard to their previous experiences or knowledge of prisons. One immigrant student described how the conversations about the influence of structures on individual behavior allowed her to better understand her father's trajectory when he was released from prison. She shared, "[These conversations about social structure and individual agency] resonated with my father's experience after he was released from his prison sentence in South Korea—recently, he explained to me that the reason he's started his own businesses his whole life wasn't because he's just entrepreneurial, but because no one would hire him." Another outside student started rethinking why and how her relatives were in prison. She wrote in her reflection:

For me prisons are not entirely foreign. I have cousins turning in and out of the system, an uncle I never met because he was killed in prison, and family church friends that have served heavy times in "their past life." I am currently reflecting on my own relationships with my cousins who have been in and out of jail, and how easy it's been for me to forget them because I do not necessarily agree with their decisions or because it's nothing new. Yet here I am on the other side of the coast having enlightening thought provoking discussions about social inequality in a prison! I am glad that I have been reflecting on this and am still not sure what this means for me when I go back home, but it's a start nevertheless.

### *Fusing Lived Experience with Urban Theory*

The wide range of ages, socioeconomic statuses, and life experiences together with an uncommonly strong sense of trust and openness among the students brought greater depth to the interpretation of class readings than sometimes emerges in the more traditional classroom context. While the students in our outside courses often seem to feel most comfortable discussing the readings abstractly, many of the participants in this class related the readings directly to their personal lives and analyzed them through this lens. We saw this practice of relating the theoretical to the personal as part of a feminist pedagogy, in which "sharing stories is . . . used to accomplish the bonding of life experience and academic material" (Ritzdorf 1993, 99). Several students noted how being placed in a room among so many people with such varying life experiences made it more relevant to share one's own point of view and explain the origins of one's thought, as compared to a class of more outwardly similar people, interpretations, and opinions. The wider variety of experiences and perspectives seemed to make participants less concerned about the negative judgments of their peers in sharing personal information as it related to the topics of study.

An imprisoned student reflected on a trend he noticed in the responses to the readings, writing in his midterm reflection that

the [outside] students tend to regularly speak in the macro. I am usually inclined to speak in the micro, as I often find that I can relate some aspect of the readings to my personal life. It is funny to me because I cannot help but to notice the difference. . . . Fieldwork, in-depth interviewing, archival research, mapmaking, and statistical analysis can do no justice to the pain one feels in utter isolation. It is one thing to read about something; it is another to experience it.

Given the importance our course placed on relating sociological theory to lived experience, we worked to ensure that class discussions did not reflect a different value placed on "personal stories" and "abstract thinking," recognizing that both ways of relating to the theories at work were equally "intellectual." The relationship to learning as an abstraction was questioned as a particular manifestation of power in an educational context where "other" perspectives (for instance, from women, people of color, queer and gender-nonconforming students) are sometimes policed through the very categories of "knowing" and "being" in relation to that knowledge that constitute elite classroom spaces.

An outside student discussed one of the ways that she experienced the classroom as unique, writing,

I feel like the [imprisoned] students have a different cadence to their classroom presence than those of us from [the outside]—they always speak from the heart, and when they talk about the issues at hand, it comes from a place of personal experience. They are passionate and fierce and bring a liveliness to the discussion that academia sometimes diffuses. Finally, they bring a class consciousness to the discussion in a manner that I have never experienced before and find to be enlightening.

The tremendous effort that all of the students put into the class did not seem to have anything to do with grades, but instead everything to do with respect for each other. Students excitedly studied together in the service of a larger project of liberation, collaboratively visioning how more equal, just cities might look (Harney and Moten 2013; Connolly and Steil 2009).

### **Conclusion**

In this urban sociology course, we sought to develop students' abilities to analyze urban inequality through diverse viewpoints and to facilitate the coproduction of knowledge about urban justice and injustice. We found that in this new context the outside and imprisoned students explored the complexity of embodying multiple social identities, wrestled with each individual's agency embedded within broader social constraints, and situated their personal experiences in a wider theoretical narrative about urban inequality. As instructors, we realized that facilitating trust and creating a



collaborative classroom dynamic in the face of significant disparities of power within the classroom is as essential to learning as mastery over the subject matter. The lessons and concepts from the syllabus resonated that much more because the classroom reflected an awareness of the social processes at work and a willingness to be open and honest in questioning one's views and positions.

As planning educators prepare practitioners and scholars for the future, we advocate for more classrooms to become "contact zones" and courses that push students to create knowledge together with those outside the university and seen to be at the margins. Through class discussions and written assignments, we saw how each student used the readings and each other's situated knowledge to make sense of their own worlds. This pedagogy can be used in any planning course taught outside the traditional classroom or alongside non-university-enrolled participants.

This article analyzes our first attempt to facilitate a learning partnership in prison between outside university students and imprisoned university students. We hope that through sustained engagement in this space, we can continue to create learning communities that push new sociological theorizing about inequality. The next step in an outside-imprisoned classroom is to collaboratively generate scholarship together so that published research and theories more fully represent the diverse worldviews in the class. We hope to continue a joint inside-outside examination of the relationship between the carceral system, urban neighborhoods, and inequality. An ongoing partnership with the prison education program would also allow us to better understand the longer-term effects of the class on outside and inside participants.

### Acknowledgments

The authors thank all of the students who participated in the course for inspiring the ideas in this article and also Jason Jackson for his helpful comments.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Notes

1. Several institutions of higher education have programs that offer courses and grant degrees to prisoners, including the Bard Prison Initiative, Wesleyan Center for Prison Education, Temple University's Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, and Boston University's Metropolitan College Prison Program, among others. Some of those institutions also have classes jointly for outside university students with imprisoned students. Beyond formal courses, the City University of New York (CUNY) Public Science Project (PSP) facilitates participatory action research (PAR) projects with graduate students and incarcerated

students where both groups collaboratively formulate research questions, as well as collect and analyze data inside prisons.

2. We initially wrote this article referring to the incarcerated students as "inside students." However, we ultimately decided that this terminology did not accurately reflect the gravity of the group's political, social, and economic circumstances, and thus refer to them as "imprisoned students" throughout the article.
3. The federal Bureau of Justice Assistance found that every dollar spent on prison education programs results in savings of four to five dollars in the cost of re-incarcerating prisoners within the three years following their release. Regardless, state funding for prison education programs continued to decline between 2009 and 2012. During the summer of 2015, President Obama announced a pilot program that would make federal aid available to a limited number of prisoners (Steil et al. 2015).
4. Supplementary Figure 1 presents excerpts from students' response papers that exemplify these learning themes that emerged repeatedly throughout the class.

### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available with the manuscript on the *JPER* website.

### References

- Agyeman, Julian, and Jennifer Sien Erickson. 2012. "Culture, Recognition, and the Negotiation of Difference: Some Thoughts on Cultural Competency in Planning Education." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 32 (3): 358–66.
- Anderson, Elijah. 1999. *Code of the Street*. New York: Norton.
- Appadurai, Arjun. 2006. "The Right to Research." *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4 (2): 167–77.
- Avila, Eric. 2014. "L.A.'s Invisible Freeway Revolt: The Cultural Politics of Fighting Freeways." *Journal of Urban History* 40 (5): 831–42.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 1997. "Rethinking Racism: Toward a Structural Interpretation." *American Sociological Review* 62 (3): 465–80.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1986. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John Richardson, 46–58. New York: Greenwood.
- Brand, Anna Livia. 2015. "The Politics of Defining and Building Equity in the Twenty-First Century." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 35 (3): 249–64.
- Brint, Steven. 2001. "Gemeinschaft Revisited: A Critique and Reconstruction of the Community Concept." *Sociological Theory* 19 (1): 1–23.
- Brooks, Michael, and Weiping Wu. 2012. "Commentary Writing Papers on Pedagogy." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 32 (4): 491–92.
- Burt, Ronald S. 2004. "Structural Holes and Good Ideas." *American Journal of Sociology* 110 (2): 349–99.
- Cadora, Eric, and Laura Kurgan. 2006. "Architecture and Justice." *Columbia University Spatial Information Design Lab*. [http://www.spatialinformationdesignlab.org/sites/default/files/publication\\_pdfs/PDF\\_04.pdf](http://www.spatialinformationdesignlab.org/sites/default/files/publication_pdfs/PDF_04.pdf). Accessed October 18, 2016.
- Campbell, Heather. 2012. "Planning to Change the World: Between Knowledge and Action Lies Synthesis." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 32 (2): 135–46.
- Coleman, James S. 1988. "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital." *American Journal of Sociology* 94 (1): 95–120.

- Connolly, James, and Justin Steil. 2009. "Finding Justice in the City." In *Searching for the Just City: Debates in Urban Theory and Practice*, edited by P. Marcuse, J. Connolly, J. Novy, I. Olivo, C. Potter, and J. Steil, 1–16. London: Routledge.
- Dewar, Margaret, and Claudia B. Isaac. 2012. "Learning from Difference: The Potentially Transforming Experience of Community-University Collaboration." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 17 (4): 334–47.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. 1903. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Chicago: A.C. McClurg & Co.
- Fanon, Frantz. 1964. *Toward the African Revolution: Political Essays*. New York: Grove Press.
- Fine, Michelle, and Maria Elena Torre. 2004. "Re-membering Exclusions: Participatory Action Research in Public Institutions." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 1 (1): 15–37.
- Fischer, Claude S. 1975. "Toward a Subcultural Theory of Urbanism." *American Journal of Sociology* 80 (6): 1319–41.
- Forester, John. 1988. *Planning in the Face of Power*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Freire, Paulo. (1970) 1993. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum.
- Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon.
- Gans, Herbert J. 1962. *The Urban Villagers: Group and Class in the Life of Italian-Americans*. New York: Free Press of Glencoe.
- Gotham, Kevin Fox. 1999. "Political Opportunity, Community Identity, and the Emergence of a Local Anti-Expressway Movement." *Social Problems* 46 (3): 332–54.
- Gould, Roger V. 2003. *Collision of Wills: How Ambiguity about Social Rank Breeds Conflict*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Granovetter, Mark S. 1973. "The Strength of Weak Ties." *American Journal of Sociology* 78 (6): 1360–80.
- Harney, Stephen Matthias, and Fred Moten. 2013. *The Undercommons: Fugitive Study and Black Study*. New York: Minor Compositions.
- hooks, bell. 1994. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. London: Routledge.
- Johnston, Andrew S. 2015. "CitySection: A Pedagogy for Interdisciplinary Research and Collaboration in Planning and Environmental Design." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 35 (1): 86–92.
- Kelley, Robin D. 2001. *Yo' mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Lin, Nan. 1999. "Building a Network Theory of Social Capital." *Connections* 22 (1): 28–51.
- Long, Judith Grant. 2012. "State of the Studio: Revisiting the Potential of Studio Pedagogy in U.S.-Based Planning Programs." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 32 (4): 431–48.
- Mills, C. Wright. 1959. *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Németh, Jeremy, and Judith Grant Long. 2012. "Assessing Learning Outcomes in U.S. Planning Studio Courses." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 32 (4): 476–90.
- Omi, Michael, and Howard Winant. 1986. *Racial Formation in the United States*. New York: Routledge.
- Portes, Alejandro, and Julia Sensenbrenner. 1993. "Embeddedness and Immigration: Notes on the Social Determinants of Economic Action." *American Journal of Sociology* 98 (6): 1320–50.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. 1991. "Arts of the Contact Zone." *Profession* 1991:33–40.
- Ritzdorf, Marsha. 1993. "The Fairy's Tale: Teaching Planning and Public Policy in a Different Voice." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 12 (2): 99–106.
- Sampson, Robert J., and Charles Loeffler. 2010. "Punishment's Place: The Local Concentration of Mass Incarceration." *Daedalus* 139 (3): 20–31.
- Leonie Sandercock, and Giovanni Attili, eds. 2010. *Multimedia Explorations in Urban Policy and Planning: Beyond the Flatlands*. New York: Springer.
- Shor, Ira. 1992. *Empowering Education: Critical Teaching for Social Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shorris, Earl. 2013. *The Art of Freedom: Teaching the Humanities to the Poor*. New York City: Norton.
- Simmel, Georg. 1950. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." In *The Sociology of George Simmel*, translated by Kurt H. Wolff, 409–24. New York: Free Press.
- Sletto, Bjørn. 2012. "Insurgent Planning and Its Interlocutors: Studio Pedagogy as Unsanctioned Practice in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 33 (2): 228–40.
- Sletto, Bjørn. 2010. "Education Reflective Practitioners: Learning to Embrace the Unexpected through Service Learning." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 29 (4): 403–15.
- Steil, Justin, Jorge De la Roca, and Ingrid G. Ellen. 2015. "Desvinculado y Desigual: Latino Segregation and Access to Opportunity." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 660 (1): 57–76.
- Steil, Justin, Arianna Martinez, Rashauna Johnson, and Sarita Daftary-Steel. 2015. "Prisons and Teaching: Destabilizing the Margins and Center." *Progressive Planning* 205:33–36.
- Thomas, June Manning, and Marsha Ritzdorf. 1997. *Planning and the African-American Community: In the Shadows*. New York: Sage.
- Tönnies, Ferdinand. 1887. *Community and Society*, translated by C. P. Loomis. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Umamoto, Kare. 2001. "Walking in Another's Shoes Epistemological Challenges in Participatory Planning." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 21 (1): 17–31.
- Wellman, Barry. 1979. "The Community Question: The Intimate Networks of East Yorkers." *American Journal of Sociology* 84:1201–31.
- Wirth, Lous. 1938. "Urbanism as a Way of Life." *American Journal of Sociology* 44 (1): 1–24.
- Wu, Jean Y. 2010. "Race Matters in Civic Engagement Work." *Asian American Studies Now: A Critical Reader*, 581–602.
- Young, Iris Marion. 2002. *Inclusion and Democracy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

### Author Biographies

**Justin Steil** is an Assistant Professor of Law and Urban Planning at MIT and the co-editor of *The Dream Revisited: Segregation and Opportunity in the 21st Century* (forthcoming) and *Searching for the Just City: Debates in Urban Theory and Practice* (2009). He is interested in social stratification and spatial dimensions of inequality, and his research examines the intersection of urban policy with property, land use, and civil rights law.

**Aditi Mehta** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT. She conducts participatory action research, and is interested in community and economic development, civic engagement and media, as well as immigration in cities.