



Research Articles

Toward Abolition Pedagogy: Teaching Social Justice in Prison Combined Classrooms

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Combined classes have emerged as a component of higher education in prisons, and bring undergraduates from “outside” together with incarcerated students. They provide a context in which to encourage dialogue and cross-cultural exchange between the non-incarcerated and the incarcerated. We argue for the necessity of critical, penal abolitionist pedagogy in combined classes in prisons. In a political climate fraught with challenges to democracy, such an abolition pedagogy must engage the socially responsive and transformative mission of education. This practice-based research article explores the difficulties of using abolition pedagogy inside the prison setting and acknowledges the limitations of critical education in prison and elsewhere to achieve racial justice and abolition. We also offer examples from coursework that encourage students from very different social positions to engage theories of justice and liberation in dialogue, and argue for the need to integrate a “pedagogy of discomfort” as a component part of such dialogue.

Keywords: Combined classes, Inside-Out classes, prison higher education, penal abolition, critical pedagogy.

There is, in the end, no teaching formula or pedagogical system that finally fulfills the abolitionist social vision, there is only a political desire that understands the immediacy of struggling for human liberation from precisely those forms of systemic violence and institutionalized dehumanization that are most culturally and politically sanctioned, valorized, and taken for granted [emphasis in original] within one’s own pedagogical moment. (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 14).

Dylan Rodriguez, a founding member of Critical Resistance, an organization seeking to abolish the prison industrial complex, has been a vocal critic of education programs in prison. Indeed, as Harkins (2016) explains, “providing access to higher education in prison does not necessarily challenge the project of mass incarceration and the dismantling of mass education in which it is situated” (para. 9). The difficulty for those of us who teach in prisons is that our “pedagogical moment,” to which Rodriguez above refers, is firmly situated in the very same space that institutionalizes dehumanization on a massive scale in the United States. Following Gilmore (2007), Harkins (2016) further argues that prisons today, in a neoliberal political context, simply manage surplus populations. No longer as invested in rehabilitation as in containment, prison imposes the same neoliberal logic as applied outside: only those individuals who can pull themselves up by their bootstraps are worthy to succeed.

Rodriguez (2010) and others active in abolitionist efforts, including us, are concerned that higher education in prison is just one more orchestration of neoliberal governance, as is higher education outside of prison. But as Harkins (2016) also reasons, this is no call to end college in prison; rather it demands that penal abolition become integral to the prison college program or classroom itself. Those of us teaching outside, who seek pedagogical moments of struggle for liberation in our classrooms have the same political desire in a different, yet comparable context of neoliberal discipline and restraint, despite lacking the explicit limitations that imprisonment imposes for interpersonal relations and intellectual freedom that we may enjoy outside. What pedagogy permits transformative, liberationist goals, including prison abolition, inside the prison classroom? In what ways are classrooms that bring college campus students together with incarcerated students inside prison an expression of such an abolitionist pedagogy? This paper emerged from a panel presentation on abolition pedagogy in which the notion of prison abolition was “premised on more than just the tangible end to prisons” (Ronda & Utheim, 2017). Presented by faculty who teach in prison college programs, the panel described prison abolition as “ending certain social practices that contribute to a culture of mass incarceration” and confronting iterant practices that dehumanize, invisibilize and punish, in prison and the social world at large (M. Ronda, R. Utheim, Nadler & Moore, personal communication, February 23, 2017).

A year earlier, at the 2016 Eastern Sociological Society annual conference, Eileen Leonard had made the argument that “sociology upends prison logic.” Following from the strength of both sociology and anthropology as liberationist disciplines, we seek to explore what “upending prison logic” might mean as part of an explicit abolition pedagogy in prison “combined classes,” also known as “inside-out” classes (a model developed by the Temple University Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program® which we describe further below). An emerging component of college-in-prison programs, combined classes bring undergraduate students from “outside” together with incarcerated students to encourage dialogue and cross-cultural exchange between these otherwise disconnected populations. As collaborative knowledge production sites with ultimate potential to inform public discourse and policy, they breathe life into student understandings of how social inequities impact different groups of people; how our identities, social relations and statuses are intertwined and embedded within particular and shifting sociopolitical and historical settings. Worldviews expand when incarcerated people are “reconceptualized as intellectuals” who contribute and coproduce knowledge (Alexander, 2017, p. 12). Understanding penal abolitionism

as a continuum that seeks to “upend prison logic,” following liberationist pedagogy,¹ we explore the challenges but crucial importance of critical, abolitionist pedagogy when teaching for social transformation in prison combined classes. Because of the affective discomfort that contextualizing oppression often implicates, we argue that this form of liberationist teaching and learning necessitates as integral a more explicit “pedagogy of discomfort” (Boler, 1999).

We begin by revisiting the purpose and importance of critical education in a contemporary political context that threatens to only further deepen neoliberal defunding of all things public. We next examine the definitions and meanings of penal abolition pedagogy and its possibilities inside prison classrooms, exploring some of the challenges that such a pedagogy presents within the confines of punitive total institutions. Finally, we contextualize abolition pedagogy in relation to Megan Boler’s (1999) seminal concept “pedagogy of discomfort,” using examples from coursework that required students from very different social positions and backgrounds to engage theories of justice, oppression and liberation in dialogue. Drawing on their experiences of teaching combined classes, the authors recognize the limitations of abolition pedagogy in prison and elsewhere to achieve racial justice and a wholesale dismantling of the prison industrial complex, but nonetheless acknowledge the important role of critical education and abolition pedagogy in moving us forward along the ‘long arc... that bends toward [social] justice’ (King Jr., 1968, p. 12).

EDUCATION, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND DEMOCRACY

The political dystopia we find ourselves in at this historical moment presents peculiar challenges in addressing the concept of abolition pedagogy. Contemporary scholars, cultural critics and political commentators have described the brand of political authoritarianism we are experiencing as characterized by anti-intellectualism, post-truth, alternate facts, demagoguery, legalized illegalities, hostile surveillance, and an overall dumbing down of the citizenry. This has particular ramifications for education broadly speaking, and for critical education and abolition pedagogy more specifically. With the accentuation of these anti-democratic forces, facilitated by “new modes of depoliticization and authoritarianism” (Giroux, 2013, p. 1), but also by more insidious “politics of organized irresponsibility” (Mills, 1945, p. 236), it becomes all the more important to clearly articulate the need for educational justice and definitional scope of education pedagogy. Our definitional point of departure builds on an understanding of the meanings and purpose of education in the tradition of critical pedagogy; one that seeks to engage the broader, transformative, socially-responsive and civically-minded mission of teaching and learning, espoused by such founding figures as Jefferson, Mann, and Dewey, and more contemporary figures like Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux within the critical education tradition.

But we are living in a time when all which once may have belonged to the public sphere and commons has come under siege. Gillian Harkins (2016) poses the broad but central question: “What does public access to higher education mean at this juncture, when the aims and practices of higher education are under a more general assault and mandated neoliberal revision” (p. 8)?

¹ What Berthoff (1990) describes as “a revolutionary move away from the ‘culture of silence’ toward naming and transforming the world,” (p. 362) in the tradition of Paulo Freire. This includes people learning about themselves and each other, about their conditions and power to change their conditions, and about the ways in which history lives in the present.

Because of its historically central role in making possible democracy and democratic participation in the first and final instance, (public) education holds a special place in this political offensive. The rise of the neoliberal university has shifted the terms of the debate considerably across academe, threatening our ability to act as agents of critique, enlightenment and redress (Mountz et al., 2015; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2000).

To live in a democracy and be a democratic citizen assumes that we think critically about self and the social wholes to which we belong, and that we are availed of the tools, resources and free will to nurture these necessary analytical skills.

The purpose and goals of education provoke important questions that nonetheless remain central to our understandings of democracy and what it means to live in a democratic society. To live in a democracy and be a democratic citizen² assumes that we think critically about self and the social wholes to which we belong, and that we are availed of the tools, resources and free will to nurture these necessary analytical skills. Reflecting the work of Giroux (2014) and others dating all the way back to the founding fathers (Nagda, Gurin & Lopez, 2003; Sehr, 1997), we argue that maintaining a functioning democracy requires that education nourish a civically engaged and socially responsible citizenship. Under the current “politics of disconnect” (Giroux 2013) however, decontextualized and isolated sound-bite messaging serves to negate the complex sociohistorical contexts that give meaning to contemporary social issues. Instant messages “become flashpoints in a cultural and political discourse that hide not merely ... operations of power, but also the resurgence of authoritarian ideologies, modes of governance, policies and social formations that put any viable notion of democracy at risk” (Giroux, 2013, p. 1).

Teaching sociology and anthropology in the tradition of critical education, and abolition pedagogy more specifically, pushes back against such “politics of disconnect” by placing curriculum and learning in broader context (cultural, sociopolitical, historical), so that citizens may appreciate the conditions under which social arrangements exist and social change takes place over time. This is one of the pathways by which sociology and anthropology can “upend prison logic.” In so doing, critical education attempts to illuminate the shifting relationships between knowledge, authority and power, but also relate “the self to public life, social responsibility [and] the demands of citizenship” (Giroux, 2014, p. 495). It is in this context that critical education and abolition pedagogy insist that a healthy, democratic and just society must provide access to quality public education that is more far-reaching and comprehensive in scope.

A number of scholars have explored the concept of abolition or abolitionist pedagogy more specifically within the context of prison education (Bordt & Carceral, 2012; Harkins & Meiners, 2014; Hartnett, 2011; Kilgore, 2011; Larson, 2011; Palmer, 2012; Rodriguez, 2010; Scott, 2014; Shaw, 2017). Shaw (2017) describes prison-based abolitionist pedagogy as “a form of education

² We use the notions of citizen and citizenship in the broadest sense, not to delineate nation-state belonging, but rather in reference to our common humanity and global citizenship.

that seeks to abolish, through scholar-activism of imprisoned students, the systems fostering the epidemic of mass imprisonment” (p. 2). More broadly, abolition pedagogy draws inspiration from activist scholars like Angela Davis and prison abolition movements that recognize basic human needs and rights—such as food, shelter and freedom—as fundamental to creating safe and healthy communities (Critical Resistance, 2019). Building on the seminal scholarship of Davis (2003), Rodriguez contends that:

abolitionist praxis does not *singularly* concern itself with abolition of the “prison industrial complex,” ... [but rather] suggests envisioning and ultimately constructing “a constellation of alternative strategies and institutions, with the ultimate aim of removing the prison from the social and ideological landscape of our society.” (as cited in Rodriguez, 2010, p. 15)

Such an educational praxis builds on the ideals of liberationist, critical pedagogy, described above, recognizing that those most affected by mass incarceration and other forms of oppression must be centrally located in efforts to redress systemic inequities. As individuals who typically “live at the intersections of multiple forms of oppression” (Kandaswamy, 2016, p. 8) and at the epicenter of the carceral state, incarcerated people have an indispensable contribution to make in fulfilling the abolitionist-liberationist tenet of centering marginalized perspectives in efforts to address social injustice.

TEACHING ABOLITION PEDAGOGY IN PRISON

What might abolition pedagogy in prison look like today, steeped as we are in neoliberal doctrine and policy reforms, as well as political polarization and perplexity more generally? How can we effectively critique and counter the “dismantling of public entitlements, such as education and welfare” (Harkins, 2016, p. 2), pursuant to cumulative neoliberal reform since the 1970s, and work toward envisioning and creating alternatives to prison as the de facto social safety net? Can access to higher education, inside and outside prison, be mobilized against neoliberal restructuring (Harkins, 2016)?

Abolitionist movements in the United States today are active against specific types of punishment (death penalty and torture), as well as against penalty itself as a proxy for justice (Van Swaaningen, 2013). Penal abolitionism is as much about practice as philosophy:

Prison abolitionism focuses on the intersections of mass incarceration, neoliberal governance, and late capitalism, asking us to formulate our resistance to the PIC [prison industrial complex] as a demand for economic, political, and social self-determination for all peoples. (Drabinski & Harkins, 2012, p. 3).

Prison abolition is often misunderstood for one of its poles, namely the full rejection of the prison institution, with no attempts to work within it for change. Here we embrace “...the abolitionist ideal [which] is ultimately a world without capitalist constructions of scarcity and market competition such that prisons are no longer necessary” (Scott, 2013, p. 403), without insisting this

precludes working inside prison, given the centrality of the institution as part of the current U.S. political economy.

Building abolitionist political movements for social change implicate far-reaching and long-term processes. In the meantime, prison classrooms guided by critical pedagogy offers an important structure and mechanism for students to contemplate and better understand “state power, economic power, social and cultural power, as well as the struggle between different groups for power” (Scott, 2013, p. 405). But how might any such critical pedagogy unfold inside prison as a physical site where disenfranchisement and dehumanization culminate in their most extreme institutionalized form? Harkins (2016) accurately notes that “college in prison programs face unusual restrictions on participating in efforts to transform the values of higher education...” (12). We here outline a few of these challenges before turning to a central, requisite ingredient of abolition pedagogy.

Censorship

Censorship and its associated restrictions is often anecdotally cited as a foremost challenge among faculty who teach higher education in prison. Educators who teach in prison typically take great care in considering what curricular materials and resources to introduce and submit to clearance procedures. This incites many to rely on circuitous means to explore potentially incendiary curricular topics, backtracking the more indirect genealogies of social phenomena and their deeper but resonant, historical contours. We must often make use of the less obvious and visible frames of reference in articulating social injustices in their institutionalized form. In other words, we are in many ways discouraged from directly identifying injustice, oppression, discrimination, marginalization, exploitation and disadvantage, as well as the variant converse forms of privileges that often go unarticulated inside or outside prison. Ironically, articulating and making clear such variant forms of existing inequalities routinely comprise the substance of both sociology and anthropology, and certainly that of critical education. In this respect, abolition pedagogy inside prison inevitably stands, at every turn, face to face with the “master’s tool” in seeking to dismantle the “master’s house” (Moore, 2017). Kesha Moore, at the 2017 Eastern Sociological Society Annual Conference, used Audre Lorde’s famous quote to invoke the limits of engaging abolitionist pedagogy within the very institutions (higher education and incarceration) that comprise the neoliberal power structure.

Harkins (2015) argues that the true path to educational access and education justice is in addressing “structural relationships among institutions of education and incarceration” (para. 30). Transformation, she says, must not focus on the individual student and teacher, but instead at “transforming relations between institutions and systems (para. 30).” She proposes a number of compelling mechanisms to achieve this that center currently and formerly incarcerated people as leaders in prison college program implementation and evaluation. Rather than demand education justice at the level of the individual college program in any given prison, or even across several, Harkins advocates shared movement building. The difficulties of this strategy are legion, as anyone who teaches in prison knows, not the least due to censorship prescripts that officially restrict any activities or stimulus (resources) that can incite organized resistance or threaten security. In New York State, the Directive covering access to media (which is used as guidance for educational

materials, as well), limits access to any material determined to threaten “orderly facility operations” (State of New York, 2014, p. 1).

Just as stifling can be surveillance surrounding what forms of information may exit the prison. It is routine procedure for college-in-prison programs to clear (with the facility) written materials authored by students prior to presenting their work to audiences that include members from the general public. In other words, censorship is a two-way process. Combined classrooms clearly, at least in part, circumvent specified restrictions on sharing of information between the incarcerated and the public, and expose non-incarcerated students to the perspectives of those who disappear from public view when incarcerated. Irrespective of the censorship limitations that maintaining institutional order and security impose, we argue that abolition pedagogy has the potential, at minimum, to stimulate transformative vision through dialogue and exchange of ideas which, in turn, can inform public discourse and generate momentum toward broader systemic change.

Self-determined Transformation

Lawrence (2015) argues that achieving racial justice is ultimately not only about enacting laws that redistribute the privilege of those who make laws, but that “revolutionary transformation comes out of active resistance” of people in movements for justice (p. 387). It is vital that college students in prison engaged in education for liberation remain center stage as part of leadership, decision-making and participation. The prison college program where we teach is so powerful in part due to the fact that its preservation was hard-won by the women incarcerated there. Following the demise of Pell Grants in 1994, the women in prison formed a vibrant inmate committee, and with the support of the then-superintendent, alongside donations from wealthy individuals, were able to keep their college program running at a time when most other programs were forced to close. One of the founding students of the college program described that the program grew out of collaboration between staff and students, both of whom had a say in how it developed. She explained that the program leadership has relied on the voices of students and staff in many of the major decisions made. Students who participate in the program know “best themselves” what the needs and limitations are. Being relied upon and invested in the program has created a strong sense of community among students and staff that is vital to keeping the program successful. The challenge, however, remains to maintain participatory leadership and transparency in decision making while confronted with contingent spheres of control at the state, facility and program levels.

Abolitionist pedagogy must build on the voices and strengths of the incarcerated in order to succeed, and such pedagogy is in many ways possible in prison only because incarcerated people are willing (and able) to fight for it.

Abolitionist pedagogy must build on the voices and strengths of the incarcerated in order to succeed, and such pedagogy is in many ways possible in prison only because incarcerated people are willing (and able) to fight for it. The history of incarcerated peoples organizing for change and seeking justice, particularly incarcerated women, is not prominent. That is a herstory we need to document more fully moving forward, and that should be articulated as part of the curriculum of

future courses. Documenting this herstory will help substantiate the ways in which revolutionary transformation “comes from what people in ...[a] movement learn about themselves, about their condition, and about their power to change that condition” (Lawrence 2015, p. 387). This is in large part what abolition pedagogy, as well as sociology and anthropology in the critical tradition, labor to achieve.

Institutionalized Dehumanization

Dylan Rodriguez (2010) has described the prison regime as “the institutionalization of systematic expansion of massive human misery” (p. 17). Central to this expansion of massive human misery is the devaluing of human lives and institutionalized dehumanization. State corrections directives typically have strict guidelines that prohibit developing meaningful relationships with people in prison when you enter facilities on “volunteer” status. This is meant to protect civilians from manipulation by “prisoners” and “the games they play,” and is intended as a ‘security’ measure.³ As Rob Scott explains “you can be banned from prison if you are deemed to be overtly friendly or ‘fraternizing’ with incarcerated people. ... This is a confounding problem for critical educators who are inclined to challenge ... the essential binaries of the dominant paradigm” (28). To deny individuals their freedom of movement and agency is the profound punishment of imprisonment, but it does not relinquish their humanity and need for social connection and meaningful relations.

Prisons by definition take great care to maintain the social category of incarcerated people as “Other.” Yet critical education and abolition pedagogy seek to break down artificial divides constructed between groups of people and individuals. These assume that we forge relationships based on a common humanity, not differential privilege and disadvantage in response to the role requirements of the established social order. In other words, the penal and abolitionist conceptual frameworks are entirely antithetical and at odds with each other. This leads to inherent pedagogical dilemmas, particularly in combined classes where differences in privilege and disadvantage can be pronounced. As Scott concludes, “educators interested in radically dismantling the prison down to its conceptual categories need to figure out how to talk about it without getting kicked out of prison...” (28).

Envisioning Alternatives

Yet another challenge involves maintaining our ability to envision alternatives and belief that a different world is possible. This is by no means limited to higher education in prison, but can feel particularly pronounced within the austere and monotonous confines that define prison life. Resistance to envisioning alternatives and engaging abolitionist praxis in the process has been attributed to the “deep and broad epistemological and cultural *disciplining of the political*

³ Here “the games they play” references a video used in mandatory New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision training of official volunteers. The video emphasizes the perceived potential for incarcerated persons to manipulate volunteers. The video was revised in the fall of 2017, and now focuses on “maintaining professional boundaries,” but retains the emphasis on the incarcerated as the potential culprit in transgressing professional ethics.

imagination [emphasis in original] that makes liberationist dreams unspeakable” (Rodriguez 2010, p. 16). This is deeply troubling. Rodriguez (2010) rightly questions how such institutionalized violence has come to be so normalized that it is beyond reproach. “What has made the prison and policing apparatus in its current form appear to be so permanent, necessary, and immovable within the common sense of social change and historical transformation” (Rodriguez, 2010)? Social theory allows us to pose and contemplate such important questions at the height of turbulent political times, of which we should not lose sight.

Pedagogy of Discomfort

A last but not least (nor final) challenge includes addressing oppression and discrimination inside the very site where the wounds that emerge thereof are often profound. Abolition pedagogy and critical education involve decentering common beliefs and assumptions that can move us far beyond our comfort zone. These stances require that we identify discrimination, exploitation, marginalization and other forms of domination. Not only does this deliberate discerning of oppression destabilize mainstream narratives, it can evoke discomfort among participants in dialogue, as well as revive painful experiences. Abolition pedagogy in prison is in this context a “pedagogy of discomfort” (Boler, 1999). It often involves entering difficult conversations that invoke pain, shame, anger, and distrust. Despite the challenges, addressing oppression remains a central component of any abolitionist pedagogy. Building on the seminal work of Megan Boler (1999) the remainder of this paper explores the need for abolition pedagogy to scaffold a more explicit pedagogy that integrates emotion as a central ingredient.

SOCIAL JUSTICE, ABOLITION AND THE PEDAGOGY OF DISCOMFORT

Rob Scott, who has been instrumental in bringing together communities of people who advocate for prison higher education in New York, sees the prison college classroom as “...perhaps one of the only spaces inside prison that is compatible with formulating critical discourse with diverse groups of incarcerated people” (Scott, 2013, p. 405). He distinguishes between contrasting goals and perspectives of teaching in prison: “radical teachers” who see the “prison classroom... as a specific site of political struggle in the era of mass incarceration...” on the one hand, and teachers who are “...merely surprised that prison can be a context for higher education” on the other (p. 23). In striving to be that radical teacher, both authors taught a combined class in prison (credit-bearing college class for all enrolled students, with a maximum class size of 16), once weekly over the duration of 15 weeks (in 2012 and 2016 respectively), covering much of the same curricular content. The courses brought outside students from two different, small liberal arts colleges (approximately 2,000 and 4,200 in size respectively) located within commutable distance to the same state prison; one a private college located in a nearby metropolitan city, the other a public college located in a nearby suburban neighborhood.

Student demographics at the smaller, private college reveal a larger proportion of female and white students (76 percent female and 60 percent white) who generally come from more privileged economic backgrounds, compared to the larger, public college (57 percent female and 53 percent white). Inside the prison, the college program population includes a majority of black and Latinx

students who are typically older than traditional college age, and who overwhelmingly come from lower income backgrounds than their outside counterparts. In sum, both combined courses brought together ethno-racially diverse students from their respective outside campuses, as well as male student participants in an otherwise entirely sex-segregated prison environment. This provided important opportunities for a diversity of perspectives to come into play as we examined coursework together.

The course was titled “Theories of Justice” and examined the meanings and definitions of justice, and how understandings of justice shape the legal, socioeconomic, political, institutional, and even practical decisions members of society make. By directly addressing the nature of social justice in relation to competing versions of justice, those of us participating in the combined course were challenged to bring our “sociological imagination” (Mills, 1959)—which promises deeper understanding of one’s own biography in historical and social context—to task. But we were also challenged to create a space focused on how to confront, negotiate and organize around the differences that ordinarily divide a group as diverse as we were: comparatively privileged young “outside” students alongside “inside” students whose lives have been fundamentally marked by inequality, dispossession and incarceration.

Critically engaging social theory and political philosophy are de-centering projects in and of themselves: even as they attempt to grapple with the problems of the day, they make us uncomfortable – and they should. In the prison combined classroom setting, the unsettling tension created when venturing beyond received and comfortable wisdom presents itinerant challenges that relate to students’ vastly divergent life experiences and perspectives. In many, if not most prison classrooms, inside students are likely to come from backgrounds that include economic, social and emotional deprivation, including histories of abuse—particularly for incarcerated women (JustPublics365, 2014). These histories of deprivation and hardship are often discernable in the resilience and life expertise that incarcerated students’ exhibit, making classroom discussion about oppression more likely to resonate with them. This risks that privileged students will silence themselves for fear of lacking knowledge, creating asymmetry in the voices expressed. There is also the risk that incarcerated students will silence themselves for fear of vulnerability to prison politics or a lack of understanding from outside students. Yet learning in settings charged with diverse perspectives ideally expose students to people, ideas, and situations they have never considered. Although “these experiences can be overwhelming and emotionally intense for students” (Roberts & Smith, 2002, p. 295) and instructors alike, there is a great deal of transformative and “deep learning” (Allred et al., 2013, p. 202) potential involved.

Scott (2013) has argued that the Temple University “Inside-Out” pedagogical model holds the possibility to achieve a balance of voices and perspectives in terms of modeling radical prison teaching (p. 407).⁴ Both authors, advertently and inadvertently, came to understand and rely on many of the pedagogical practices espoused by the Inside-Out model as a constructive means to negotiate classroom dynamics. The Inside-Out paradigm adheres to a deliberate critical pedagogy that seeks to build “classroom communities dedicated to dialogue, critical reflection, experiential learning, and responsible collective educational inquiry” (Davis & Roswell, 2013, p. 3). As such, Inside-Out combined course curriculum attempts to cultivate learning experiences in which the classroom becomes a place to not only identify injustice but also model justice, to whatever extent

⁴ For Scott (2013), “radical” means anything that “challenges the premises of the prison system” (p. 401).

possible, through its intentional pedagogy. This intentional pedagogy follows a participatory praxis, whereby instructors include students in decision-making, and solicit student input in crafting guidelines for dialogue and group dynamics.

Many of the heuristic tools that the Inside-Out curriculum relies on can be recognized from basic education practice, collaborative learning, conflict mediation and critical pedagogy more generally; it is perhaps the deliberate commitment to address the culpability of confronting injustices that best distinguishes the model. Inside-Out pedagogy explicitly aims to galvanize the difficulties of engaging people from very different backgrounds in circle dialogue for the semester. As such, the model encourages instructors of combined classrooms “to embrace a pedagogy of uncertainty and disturbance” (Butin, 2013, p. 97). It is a pedagogy that “suppresses neither the differences nor the similarities of the diverse group, using difference as a source of synergy,” and that “displaces the content and responsibility of learning away from the instructor and onto the learners...” (Butin, 2013, p. 94).

In teaching the combined course inside a state prison for women, both authors deliberately incorporated and addressed such “pedagogy of uncertainty and disturbance” as part of the curriculum. Using classical and contemporary theory to understand how social institutions and public policy structure our lives, the course began by examining the canonical writings associated with utilitarianism, libertarianism, deontology, ethics and virtue. As students analyzed traditional political theories of justice in dialogue, class participants expressed their concern with the largely decontextualized theoretical focus placed on (inequitable) resource distribution and its burdens throughout society. More specifically, students began critiquing classical modern theories of justice for confirming white, male privilege, and for abstracting the variant struggles over power widespread across sectors of society. Inside and outside students alike argued that the canonical works of Bentham, Stuart Mills, Kant, Hayek, Friedman, Nozick, Rawls, and the like, have the discrediting effect of erasing the diverse voices that reflect lived experience, most notably those who are marginalized and “unjustly” treated and thereby ought to be at the center of justice debates. This served as an example of the limitations that employing the “master’s tools” (male privileged theories of justice) to dismantle the “master’s house” (patriarchal injustice) yields (Lorde, 1984).

Class participants in both courses expressed mounting frustration with the privileged perspectives of theoretical thinkers in the classical tradition. Students, especially inside students, rejected even the most liberal thinkers, including Rawls (1971), arguing that the “veil of ignorance” was foolhardy and perhaps only possible for those who would be most likely to succeed in society, regardless. We then turned to feminist critiques and theories of justice, including the work of Iris Marion Young on the different “faces of oppression” with regards to definitions of justice. In effectively contextualizing and breathing life into the central subject matter of justice (or lack thereof)—oppression and domination—Young (1990) provides a theory of justice embedded in lived experience that more closely reflected student experiences and concerns. If we recognize that justice can never prevail where abuse of power generates oppression and domination, then any compelling theory of justice must necessarily recognize variant manifestations of oppression and domination as embodied experience. Students made clear the comparable ease with which they could relate to and apply to life experience, the feminist perspective that Iris Young (1990) provides.

Young sees justice primarily in terms of overcoming oppression and domination, which are understood principally in terms of groups of people pitted against each other. She distinguishes five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. Referring to “an enabling conception of justice,” Young (1990) takes us beyond distribution to “institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation” (p. 3). Particular attention is devoted to the ways in which decisions are made in society, to social divisions of labor, and to the way in which culture and hegemony perpetuate oppression. Combined class students could identify with variant components of Young’s (1990) “faces of oppression,” intuitively recognizing the means by which groups of people come to be divided throughout society. Her analysis allowed students to connect theory of oppression to experience grounded in the realities of their lives as black or brown, female, homosexual, gender nonconforming, poor, learning disabled, aging, or various combinations of the above. In so doing, she moved students beyond generalized and detached theory, devoid of feeling, resonating affective manifestations of oppression. Understanding these visceral “faces of oppression” is an important step toward developing grounded theories through which we can overcome social injustice, moving forward.

For Young, the fundamental question of justice thus involves identifying tangible forms (lived experiences) of oppression and what we can do to overcome them. The importance of combined classes and their potential to provide shared understanding and cross-fertilizing insight should not be underestimated in this respect. The role of diversity in learning and knowledge accumulation is controversial but has been widely documented (Gurin et al., 2002; Nelson Laird, 2005; Phillips, 2014), and combined classrooms often implicate a full range of dimensions along which diversity is typically measured: “nationality, race, class, gender, sexual orientation [identity], religion, age, learning/teaching style, and [life] experiences” (Roberts & Smith, 2002, p. 292). These dimensions of diversity and the ways in which they intersect are relevant to understanding structural oppression as lived experience—from the perspectives of both inside and outside students. The diverse and often adverse life experiences upon which students in combined classes build, enables broader understanding of how structural oppression and violence are shaped by intersecting identity markers. Yet building on diversity, experiences of oppression, and how students are differentially located within a web of structural forces that discriminate, can create a politically and emotionally charged classroom atmosphere. As Roberts and Smith (2002) explain, students may be

concerned about what they can contribute to the class, and they may feel apprehensive about sharing their identities and political views. Students’ awareness of their emotions is intensified because of differences in beliefs and values, but also because they are talking about who they are; this context has the potential to build barriers to student engagement. (p. 292)

Despite students’ potential apprehension and hesitancy to engage, the emotionally charged classroom provides important sites where the role of emotion can serve “as a powerful medium for critical inquiry” (Prebel, 2016, p. 2). Feminist scholars have long identified the role of emotion in pedagogy and learning (e.g., see Lutz & Abu-Lughod, 1990). As Megan Boler (2015) explains “feminist pedagogies emphasize how processes of learning, social change and education are intimately bound up with feeling. Integrating theory and praxis, educational practices [can] enable

students to understand emotions as a legitimate source of knowledge alongside more favored educational compartments like logic, reason, and rationality” (p. 1491). This bears particular relevancy for Young’s theorizing of oppression—as embedded in grounded experience—in that “emotions reflect students’ identities within social institutions and provide a means through which students might analyze social discourse and power relations” (Prebel, 2016 p. 2). In sum, such a pedagogy, and epistemology more broadly, must take great care to not divorce learning from emotion, in classical Western patriarchal fashion. It must instead deliberately seek to render emotion “a source for social change...and... key site of investigation for those...interested in connections between pedagogy and social change” (Prebel, 2016, p. 2).

Beyond the self-censorship, obstacles and risks of combined courses, reside varied and dynamic perspectives and cross-fertilizing exchanges that can lead to greater understanding and knowledge accumulation. It is in this rich but unsettling context that a more deliberate pedagogy of discomfort (Boler, 1999) can assist students as they navigate complicated terrain. Julie Prebel (2016) describes Boler’s “pedagogy of discomfort” as “a purposeful way of examining uncomfortable emotions we (and our students) might otherwise resist or deflect... [fear, shame, anger, pain etc.], as well as [the] guilt and ... discomfort produced when we are forced to question our beliefs and assumptions” (as cited in Prebel, 2016, p. 1). Such a pedagogy understands emotion as “a powerful medium for critical inquiry” (Prebel, 2016, p.2) and important source of knowledge, not as “innate weakness and pathology” (Boler, 2015, p. 1492) to be circumvented in favor of abstract reason and rationality. Such a pedagogy must take stock of the emotional toil that social justice inquiry implicates and must remain mindful of participants’ shifting experiences in the classroom; it must proactively seek to cultivate a supportive, protective environment across differences. A pedagogy of discomfort must therefore explore important questions such as how to help students explore and manage the emotions integral to understanding lived experiences, including social injustice. Moreover, how can we illuminate the significant collective and shared dimension of emotion as experiences that emerge “relationally in encounters between people,” (Prebel, 2016 p. 3); that are ultimately constituted between people and not contained as vestiges within individuals? How can we productively facilitate learning environments in which emotions are recognized as generative; as “part of a process of engaging and potentially disrupting social norms, discourses, values, and hierarchies” (Prebel, 2016 p. 6)?

CONCLUSION

We have explored some of the challenges that critical pedagogy can present in combined classrooms inside prison, and have relied on examples from coursework that encourage students from very different social positions to engage theories of justice, oppression, and liberation in dialogue. The authors acknowledge the limitations of abolition pedagogy in prison and elsewhere to (swiftly) achieve racial justice and abolition, yet recognize the importance of the abolitionist impulse writ large in moving forward the long arc that bends toward justice. (King, 1958). As such we argue that combined classes are important sites where dialogue and exchange of ideas among students of diverse backgrounds and identities can be facilitated, and where unique opportunities for cross-cultural exchange between the non-incarcerated and the incarcerated are occasioned. In an increasingly diversified society, but also a political climate fraught with ongoing racial injustice and challenges to democracy, the authors recognize the need

to reaffirm the purpose and meanings of education in the tradition of critical pedagogy, and develop a more deliberate “pedagogy of discomfort” that can nurture dialogue across what have become increasingly painful divides.

Several of the classroom techniques used for managing the challenges of engaging diversity (visible and invisible) in combined classrooms were noted by participants in a 2012 Inside-Out round table discussion, later published in the *Turning Teaching Inside Out* volume (Atiya et al., 2013). We have chosen to reiterate some of the component parts of this model to add to the narrative of combined course experiences, and to illustrate the potential that a pedagogy of discomfort can have for motivating critical thinking about how institutions constrain us, and how we might begin to address those constraints productively, if not always so radically. It is not one particular method or strategy in isolation that facilitates the transformative or “deep learning” (Allred et al., 2013, p. 202) that the authors seek to encourage in combined courses. Following the lead of the Inside-Out model, it is the “unique, intense, and carefully sequenced and calibrated mixture and juxtaposition of strategies that makes the whole larger than the sum of its parts” (Allred et al. 2013, p. 201). Such pedagogy and curriculum inevitably bump up against prison logic, and can be quite a challenge as we confront the limits of neoliberal governance at work in prison. Despite moving us closer toward abolition pedagogy, the limitations that the current-day “politics of fear” in particular impose, in the name of safety, dictate prison regulations that invariably curtail intellectual freedoms and infringe upon pedagogical intent.

Investment in prison higher education must work toward abolitionism in the broadest sense, and by so doing need not foreclose efforts to challenge social injustice as a system-wide structure of oppression. Students in prison have indispensable knowledge to contribute toward these efforts, in shedding light on the lived experiences at the center of systemic oppression. Despite the institutional constraints and sentient challenges that abolitionist pedagogy of discomfort present inside prison, the voices of those imprisoned and the cross-cultural exchanges between students inside and outside prison can generate vital insight and dialogue for understanding the power relations of structural oppression – past, present and preemptive.

We end by returning to Dylan Rodriguez who, building on the seminal work of Angela Davis, contends that the concept of abolition

posits the material and historical necessity ... of human freedom based on a cultural-economic infrastructure that supports the transformation of oppressive relations that are the legacy of genocidal conquest, settler colonialism, racial slavery/capitalism, compulsory hetero-patriarchies, and global white supremacy. (Davis as cited in Rodriguez, 2010, p. 15)

Unearthing the specific means by which “history lives in the present” (Coyle & Schept, 2017, p. 400) is a fundamental goal of abolition pedagogy. Building on the deep and broad rigor of liberal arts education, abolitionist praxis allows us to illuminate the legacies and cultural particulars, and question the doxa and historical narratives handed to us, which together configure the sociopolitical realities of any pedagogical moment. By cooperating with the very institution that abolition advocates by definition oppose, critical educators in prison seemingly do not support efforts to dismantle the prison industrial complex. At minimum however, abolition pedagogy in

prison seeks to “upend prison logic” by placing U.S. mass incarceration in broader political and historical context, at home and cross-culturally, and making visible the histories that generated its social impetus and lasting oppressive force. This is a sorely needed step in the commitment to garner greater understanding and public awareness among an increasingly agitated and alienated populace.

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