

Sally Benson and Christine Walsh

“A Collaborative Approach to Higher Education Programming for Incarcerated and Post-Incarcerated Individuals”

Earlier this year, I collaborated with Christine Walsh and Bryan Smith, who unfortunately could not be here, in designing and facilitating a reflective writing workshop in a high-security yard of the Arizona State Prison Complex in Tucson. In our collaboration, we found that we navigated what we might call the “difficult nexus” of stakeholder concerns. *Nexus* refers to the intersection of multiple stakeholders. *Difficult* refers to the different backgrounds, values, positions, and agendas that can be in conflict at such intersections. Two of us are white female university graduate students at a major research institution, and one of us is white, male, and employed by a division of the criminal justice system. We attempted to acknowledge these positions and shared with the students our own relationships to incarceration. One of us is a former staff educator at a state penitentiary, one of us has a family member who was incarcerated, and one of us was formerly incarcerated. Our student participants included eleven men whose backgrounds and paths towards incarceration had not been collectively shared with us, or possibly with one another, prior to the workshop.

When brainstorming about how to “design” the workshop, we considered how our justice system and educational system relies on static markers to categorize individuals (e.g. prior conviction, lack of job skills, failed attempts at recovery, degrees, job titles, institutional status). These markers are often internalized as unchangeable and inform self-beliefs and identities informed by power and privilege. Our goal was to create a space that allowed for more plasticity. Directly addressing static markers, owning one’s authenticity, and rewriting personal narratives creates a more fluid continuum. This affords individuals the space to move forward.

All participants of the workshop--the three of us and the students inside--responded to reading and writing prompts that encouraged reflection on how we identify ourselves both internally and to those around us. We found that reflective writing encouraged all participants to closely examine the scripts that we had embraced and upon which we had constructed our identities and to experiment with writing new narratives. Questions around core truths, values, loyalty, and authenticity emerged in our discussions. At the end of our six-week workshop, participants commented on the value of hearing others’ stories and sharing their own and

expressed willingness to help one another. This was a powerful outcome, because it implied that participants could *potentially* become stewards willing to manage safe “spaces” for collaboration and mutual support. Peer-to-peer collaboration also potentially flattens the asymmetry inherent in outsider/insider collaboration.

We’d like to explore how the reflective process that we valued in our prison workshop in Arizona, which helped us navigate a difficult nexus of our positions in relation to those of others, might be extended to include other stakeholders - to include those invested in higher education initiatives for incarcerated and formerly-incarcerated individuals including those whose jobs are directly impacted by these initiatives.

Amber and James described how the canonized curriculum in the classroom perpetuates marginalization. Likewise, our teaching pedagogies, institutional practices, individual needs, and institutional mandates can collide and create a “difficult nexus” of differing agendas. Is it possible to re-imagine our respective positionality to create a similar “safe space,” such as that created in our workshop, wherein all stakeholders of prison higher education -- meaning incarcerated students and other representatives of the prison and of the academic institution -- can safely collaborate as participants? There is irony in the fact that the planning of such programs often takes place in spaces that exclude key participants. For example, those with first-hand experience of incarceration would seem to know best what their needs are for success – not just on the inside, but also on the outside – as successful college students and as engaged members of their communities. From that premise, what if we extended our conversations about how to create sustainable higher education in prison to include all participants?

5 - min Pause: Who do you think should be at the planning table? For example, could prison administrators, staff, residents, and outside representatives of academic institutions leave their roles and institutional mandates temporarily to enter the discussion as participants invested in a shared mission?

The national conversation around higher education in prison has increasingly acknowledged the importance of including--and even centering--incarcerated and formerly incarcerated voices in creating higher education programs in prison. Representatives of academic institutions, who have not personally experienced incarceration, may not understand some of the particular needs of those inside. For example, we were told by prison administrators to limit our

workshop to five weeks. Although the feedback from incarcerated participants was positive, we left without an understanding of the possible consequences beyond that space. We hoped that the participants would continue to share with each other, but we knew that might not happen if a space wasn't held for them. While the work of reflection could potentially heal, it could also potentially harm. The writing prompts might, and very likely would, bring up difficult memories and feelings that could go unprocessed without a space being held for it. Could the collaborative space of our workshop impact other prison spaces? Anna Plemons describes the challenges incarcerated students face when collaboration and respect in the classroom may not carry over into the yard without violent consequences (92). As outsiders, according to Plemons, we may be so invested in fixing or transforming students through our programs that we cannot see our efforts or expectations as potential acts of violence. For incarcerated individuals to commit to being successful participants in a higher education program, it may mean that they must position themselves in direct conflict with their roles in other prison contexts.

Similarly, custody staff are often excluded from the planning processes of developing higher education programs inside, yet their jobs are directly impacted by the presence of outsiders in the prison, by added security, logistical, and scheduling issues, count, and more. Simone Davis argues that outside educators who enter prisons create more security risks and also increased surveillance for those inside (MacLean qtd. by Davis 147). She also questions whether prison college programs driven by outsiders' market values linked to reduced recidivism -- only perpetuate the current prison model, by making it seem more palatable (147). When in-situ programs are being discussed, at what point do prison staff become invested stakeholders and engaged participants in this effort? So, one question to ask is whether safe spaces of collaboration, such as the one created in our workshop, are truly safe, and can they extend beyond the classroom? And if so, can such similar spaces include other stakeholders as invested participants in higher education in prison?

5-min Pause: Do we think this is possible or even desirable? Has anyone here had an experience with this, and what are your thoughts?

In her discussion of how prison education programs might be assessed, Plemons draws on Indigenous critical theory, which focuses on the relation of individuals to one another in a community. Rather than separating individuals from the larger whole and focusing on

measurable outcomes, she acknowledges the existing problematic relationships between students, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders (95). This approach strengthens relationships in order to bridge inherent disconnections. In this model, overall success of a program is reflected by the gain for all involved. The space of higher education in prison would then become a space of participation rather than one of receiving or of delivering services. There is at minimum a triangle of relations involving the students, teachers, and prison officials that must exist if a program is to succeed. These roles traditionally line up vertically within a hierarchy of power. If these roles were redefined as participants rather than as recipients, deliverers, and administrators, would there be more buy-in from all parties? If so, could the design of programs be more democratic, and could their success be more equitable and just? *Each gatekeeper along an otherwise vertical hierarchy could instead steward or “curate” (Jacobi 70) a bridge of connectivity for the collective whole to function sustainably.*

5 - min Pause: What barriers exist for “cross-institutional” or cross-relational engagement? How can we overcome these barriers?

Both the university and the prison are institutions where roles of power are constantly negotiated. Vulnerability is an important piece in establishing spaces of trust, but vulnerability in institutions can be dangerous. Each of us is bound in some way to our institutionally-driven mandates and/or personal needs and concerns. Where is the space that transcends delineations in order to support true cross-institutional and cross-relational collaboration? Until every stakeholder can 1) identify their respective agenda, and 2) exercise a willingness to put that agenda aside temporarily, how is it possible to respectfully consider everyone’s concerns? Even the discussion we’re having now is in many ways lopsided in terms of who has access to it. Plemons urges us to consider how relationality informs all of our choices regarding choosing education in prison (94). Is it possible to locate safe spaces in which multiple stakeholders, as co-investors of higher education in prison, might recognize a shared language that supports a shared mission? Is it possible to find common ground that might shift our concept of what prison education looks like and thereby shift the rhetoric we keep hearing about prison higher education as a form of capital for taxpayers because it reduces recidivism?

Pause and open up Q & A: Amber and James cited Mackall’s concept of prison education as a “democratizing tool that encourages civic minded citizenry.” What would this kind of education look like? More broadly, what would a socially just collaboration look like between those stakeholders?

Cited Works:

- Davis, Simone Weil, and Bruce Michaels. “Ripping Off Some Room for People to ‘Breathe Together’: Peer-to-Peer Education in Prison.” *Social Justice*, vol 42, no. 2, 2015, (146 - 158).
- Jacobi, Tobi. “Against Infrastructure: Curating Community Literacy in a Jail Writing Program.” *Community Literacy Journal*, vol. 11, no. 1, 2016, (64 - 75).
- Plemons, Anna. “Something Other Than Progress: Indigenous Methodologies and Higher Education.” *Prison Pedagogies: Learning and Teaching with Imprisoned Writers*, edited by Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson, Syracuse University Press, 2018, (88 - 105).