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To cite this article: Shoshana Pollack (2016) Building Bridges: Experiential and Integrative Learning in a Canadian Women's Prison, Journal of Teaching in Social Work, 36:5, 503-518, DOI: [10.1080/08841233.2016.1242523](https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2016.1242523)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841233.2016.1242523>



Published online: 07 Nov 2016.



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Building Bridges: Experiential and Integrative Learning in a Canadian Women's Prison

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a study of student experiences of a Walls to Bridges (W2B) class taught by Faculty of Social Work instructors in a Canadian women's prison. The Walls to Bridges (W2B) program is based on the U. S. Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program and brings students from the university together with students from the prison to study for a semester long course in correctional settings. The article reports on how the program pedagogy of experiential learning and Talking Circle processes impacted student's awareness of privilege, marginalization and stereotypes, commitment to social change and action.

KEYWORDS

Experiential learning;
prisons; women in prison;
social justice education

Experiential and community-based learning is considered an important way for social work students to gain “real-world” knowledge of the concepts and topics they are studying in the classroom and a method of reducing the university/community divide. However, community-based learning programs have been critiqued for privileging student learning goals over the needs of community members and for the paternalistic helping dynamic that these programs can invoke (Mitchell, 2008; Ringstad, Levy, Garcia, Jasek-Rysdal, 2012). In addition, community-based learning opportunities for social work students rarely include criminalized or incarcerated peoples, perhaps because of lack of access and/or concerns for students' safety. This article reports on a study conducted with students—both incarcerated and not—who participated in a Canadian university-based program called Walls to Bridges (W2B). This program, based on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program in the United States, provides opportunities for criminalized and/or incarcerated students to take classes with university-based students as peers. There are few opportunities for social work students to engage with incarcerated people as peers (rather than in a professional or “helping” role), to engage in collective learning with imprisoned people, and/or to see behind stereotypes and media depictions of prisons and prisoners. The W2B program provides this opportunity by bringing together social work students and students incarcerated at a women's prison in Ontario, Canada. The first

courses based on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange model were offered in Canada in 2011. By 2012, the Walls to Bridges National Canadian Office was formed, annual instructor trainings were developed, and classes were being taught in two Canadian provinces, Ontario and Manitoba (Davis, 2013).

Pedagogically, W2B is an experiential learning model aimed to create spaces of analysis, reflection, and action within a community of incarcerated and university students. The instructor of a W2B class is considered a facilitator of the learning process—she or he does not lecture but through a variety of teaching techniques *holds the space* in which students can explore complex and challenging ideas from a variety of perspectives, lived experiences, and contexts. This article reports on findings from a study about student experiences of taking social work courses through the W2B program. The W2B pedagogical approach figured prominently in participants' responses. Specifically, this article reports on the W2B wholistic and integrative learning model; how it contributed to students' awareness of privilege, marginalization, and stereotypes; and its impact on commitment to social change and action.

Background

Based on the U.S. Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, the Canadian W2B program shares many of its practices and premises. (For information on the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program please see <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>). Walls to Bridges is a university-based program that teaches classes in correctional settings, with both university students and students who are incarcerated or on parole/probation in the community. Pedagogically, we use a similar teaching model as described by Lori Pompa (2013), founder of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. Pompa explained that Inside-Out classes are explicitly *not* about helping, researching, or mentoring incarcerated students; the pedagogical foundation is collaborative learning in which all students are equal carriers of knowledge. The instructor creates a space in which she or he is both a learner and a teacher and in which all students share in collaborative and exploratory dialogue about the course content (Pompa, 2013). However, different national, cultural, and criminal justice contexts mean that there are some significant differences between how the two programs operate. One distinction relates to the dramatic overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in Canadian prisons, in some provinces from 90% to 98% of people in jails and prisons are Indigenous (Davis, 2013, p. 260). The W2B instructor training incorporates Indigenous ways of knowing and learning into the teaching pedagogy in recognition of this fact. Another difference is that, contrary to the U.S. program (Pompa, 2013), W2B does do advocacy and public education, both in the prison and in the community about gender, criminalization, social justice, and education.

All students who complete the class, including those in jails or prisons, receive university credit. Because the classroom format and teaching method in W2B classes is different from most conventional university teaching, university or college instructors who teach in this program are required to take a 5-day instructor training program in the W2B pedagogy. Key principles underpinning the teaching model are wholeness, authenticity, collaborative and experiential learning, and the embrace of lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. In a W2B classroom all participants (students and instructors) are understood to have intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and experiential knowledge—all of which they bring to the classroom and to scholarly analysis and reflection. Further, the classroom dynamic is one in which all participants—students and instructors—are considered to be both teachers and learners, thus reducing traditional educational hierarchies about who is a legitimate “knower.” The course instructor is responsible for facilitating the academic material; providing the space or context for discussions; creating collaborative activities to frame dialogue; and ensuring that the classroom climate is open, dialogical, and respectful.

Typically, university education tends to favor the “banking method” of teaching, which implies the instructor is the “knower” of the material being examined and she or he “deposits” this information into the minds of the students (Freire, 1970). Although pedagogically social work education tends more toward the dialogical and experiential, the instructors’ knowledge is generally privileged.

The W2B model combines Talking Circle protocols with small- and large-group activities. The use of Talking Circles has been found to be beneficial for reducing power dynamics, allowing for diverse perspectives, honoring lived experience as sources of knowledge, and creating a community of shared learning (Cowen & Beard Adams, 2008; Freire, 1970; Graveline, 1998; Palmer, 2009; Pranis, 2005). Circle pedagogy supports the core principles of W2B - equalitarian learning, multiplicity of perspectives, learning with the whole self, self-reflexivity, and respectful listening. Circles symbolize equality and interconnectedness, and as there is no “head” of a circle, the legitimacy of all participants as both learners and facilitators of learning is recognized. Accountability to the learning process is enhanced by the ability of participants to see one another’s faces, body language, and expressions.

Talking Circles and Attentive Listening

Many social work classes focus on social justice, inequalities, diversity, and privilege. Educators have identified a variety of challenges to teaching diversity and oppression, such as encountering students’ resistance to examining privilege, tokenizing and essentializing marginalized students, and dealing with heightened emotions in the classroom (Bernard, Fairtlough, Fletcher, & Ahmet, 2013; Cramer, Ryosho, & Nguyen, 2012; Fineran, Bolen, Urban-Keary,

& Zimmerman, 2002; Garcia & Van Soest, 2000; Garran & Rasmussen, 2014; Jones, 1999). The circle process, and the W2B model in general, creates a space to explore these issues in a different way and fosters a reflective, rather than reactive, classroom climate. Circle pedagogy can be used to achieve a variety of pedagogical goals; sharing perspectives on the readings for the day, examining a particular topic or course concept, reflecting on class process, and/or making decisions about class projects. Although not always comfortable or easy, some of the benefits of the circle in a W2B class are that it decreases a sense of competition about who has the “right” answer; allows quieter students to share their perspectives; illustrates in action how our own locations and experiences affect how we view an issue, text, or event; and supports a process of collaborative knowledge building. The circle also helps bring to awareness unexamined assumptions.

There are various formats and ways of working with Talking Circles, but most models have their origins (whether explicitly acknowledged or not) in Indigenous ways of sharing and learning (Cowan & Adams 2008; Pranis, 2005; Running Wolf & Rickard, 2003; Tempier, Papequash, Duncan, & Tempier, 2011). Cowan and Beard Adams (2008) wrote that Talking Circles have long been used by Indigenous elders across the world to engage in collective decision making and sharing. They stated that Talking Circles reflect the Indigenous epistemological position that multiple perspectives are essential for community building, learning, and decision making because they are dialogical rather than dialectical and focus on synthesis and integration. Further, Talking Circles foster self-reflection, attentive listening, and collaborative construction of knowledge. Cowan and Beard Adams (2008) explained the process in the following way:

Each person shares a perspective, going in order around the circle, slowly revealing the full array of ideas, concerns, feelings, insights, and so forth. All participants have the right and responsibility to share authentically for as long as needed. . . . No one is bound to address what others address, and each person may contribute whatever he or she believes is of value. As each person takes a turn to speak, others listen. (p. 139)

In a book chapter about her experiences as a student in a W2B class, Larson (2013) stated that “the code of entitled, uninterrupted time to speak for everyone” (p. 67) during a circle process was instrumental in her learning about herself and the course content and was far more powerful than any other university class she had taken. In her indictment of conventional university education, Larson wrote that the W2B class pedagogy made her acutely aware that “while my inside classmates live in cages, I have been educated in one” (p. 64). In particular, she critiqued social work education for discouraging emotions, uncertainty, and vulnerability in the classroom in favor of disembodied intellectualism. She identified circle pedagogy and its emphasis on listening deeply with an open heart as pivotal to her learning.

Graveline (1998), a Metis educator, wrote that the reason Indigenous elders passed around a “talking stick” or object for each person to hold as they spoke was to encourage respectful and *attentive listening*.

We must each learn to pay each other full attention and to take responsibility for maintaining focus on what each speaker is sharing. This assists people in learning not to project their experience and feelings onto others. The only way to really “know,” to really see and hear someone else, is to fully experience and own our emotions and thoughts. Through respectful listening we are better able to enter into another’s experience through words. (p. 139)

Attentive listening, both to others in the circle and to one’s own inner thoughts and feelings, is also foundational to Parker Palmer’s “circle of trust” approach. Palmer (2009) wrote,

We speak from our own center to the center of the circle—to the receptive heart of the communal space—where what we say will be held attentively and respectfully. This way of speaking differs markedly from everyday conversations in which we speak from our own intellect or ego directly to the intellect or ego of someone on whom we hope to have an impact. (p. 188)

Palmer’s principle of “speaking from our own center to the center of the circle” is helpful in W2B classes because it allows people to own and share their perspectives without attempting to convince or persuade others. Further, a key principle of Palmer’s circle of trust is no “helping, saving, advising or setting each other straight” (p. 114), which assists both students and facilitator to recognize these communicative impulses and encourages *reflective* rather than *reactive* speech.

The principles of Talking Circles and Palmer’s circles of trust run counter to how most of us have been trained as educators and students. Circle processes require a different way of listening; circle members listen just as much to themselves (their inner dialogue and emotions) as they do to others, fostering what Palmer (2009) referred to as an ability to hear one’s own “inner teacher” (p. 119). W2B classes are premised upon the idea of dialogue and listening, a noncombative process that tends to lead to self-reflection on the judgments we hold (e.g., about jails, “criminals,” privilege, language, and othering processes) and where they come from.

Nyki Kish (Freitas, McAuley, & Kish, 2014) wrote about taking a W2B class while locked up in a maximum security unit. She stated that there is “a healing quality to the circle setting” (p. 308) that posed a stark contrast to life in a maximum security unit. Furthermore,

[in] class circles there was no hierarchy and there were not the power struggles that dominated my experience with both guards and other imprisoned women in max. In class circles I felt safe to think, and share, and interact, and especially as our class read texts and poetry relevant to oppression, criminalization and issues of

imprisonment, I began to find something I had lost in the trauma of experiencing the penal system: my voice. (p. 308)

As discussed next, many students (whether incarcerated or not) spoke of cultivating their voice within the circle context.

Othering and Safety

Social work educators have identified challenges in creating a “safe” learning environment, especially in classes in which reflection on privilege, power, and marginalization are foregrounded (Garraan & Rasmussen, 2014). In addition, there are further dynamics that need to be considered when teaching a W2B class related to the potential objectification of incarcerated students.

Social work students, particularly at the graduate level, are socialized to see themselves as “professional helpers,” and the temptation to transform their incarcerated colearners into the Other is great. Students are screened and interviewed before being accepted into the class, and it is made clear that this is neither service learning nor a practicum; the class is not about helping or learning to work with “offenders.” The program purpose is to bring together students who do not normally associate as peers or colearners whose different (and similar) life experiences allows for a rich exploration of course topics. Social work students often do, however, express a desire to “hear the stories” of women prisoners. In her article about cross-cultural education, Jones (1999) powerfully argued that the dominant group’s need to “know the Other” is an attempt to exonerate one’s self from colonial processes. She wrote that “the very act of ‘knowing,’ of ‘being taught’ becomes, most significantly, not an act of logic or an accumulation of information or even a call to action, but an experience of redemption” (pp. 312–313). Instructors of W2B courses should be cognizant of outside students’ impulses to hear “criminal narratives” as well as expressions of pity and/or helping, valorization, and exoticization and other forms of Othering.

Issues of power and privilege are unequivocally at the forefront of a W2B class, given that half the students are living in cells. Moreover, in Canada, Aboriginal and African Canadian peoples are *over*represented in jails/prisons and *under*represented in universities. Thus, in many W2B classrooms, the majority of university-based students will likely be from more privileged racial and socioeconomic classes than the majority of incarcerated/criminalized students.

In their challenge to conventional ideas about safety in social work classrooms, Garraan and Rasmussen (2014) suggested the importance of acknowledging discomfort; a safe learning environment does not necessarily mean a comfortable one. Discomfort is an inevitable and perhaps necessary aspect of learning about new perspectives and experiences and confronting one’s own biases and

assumptions. Garraan and Rasmussen pointed to the role of the instructor in creating a “container” or “holding environment” in which difficult conversations take place. Pedagogically, the W2B model stresses the importance of instructor awareness of the differences in privilege and power, strives to create an environment in which students can examine course texts collaboratively and through different means, aims to create a space in which various experiences and perspectives can be explored without fear of reprisal and/or criticism, and to develop processes for productively dealing with discomfort.

The Study Description

The W2B program began in 2011 as a collaboration between the Faculty of Social Work and a local women’s prison. The first W2B class was a required MSW course called Diversity, Marginalization and Oppression. The class comprised seven MSW students and 10 incarcerated students. When the class ended, the students wanted to continue our meetings together, so we established the Walls to Bridges Collective, which continues to meet every two weeks at the prison to this day (it’s been 3.5 years at time of writing). The collective at the prison also became the trainers for an annual five-day training in the W2B pedagogy. One of the projects the W2B collective decided to undertake was a research study to explore the impact of W2B classes on both groups of students. We received university and private foundation funding to undertake the project. Collective members helped to design the methodology and interview guide, were provided with training in interview techniques, and in July 2013 conducted the interviews with former students of W2B classes. The author did not conduct any of the interviews myself due to the potential conflict of interest presented both by being an instructor in the program and by being involved in the development of the Canadian program nationally. The overarching research question that guided this study was, What is the impact of the W2B pedagogy on student learning about power, diversity, privilege, and community engagement? The interview guide was semi-structured to allow freedom for respondents to speak of what was most important to them and was organized around questions about the class format, activities, and process; meaningful moments and/or moments of discomfort; assumptions about university education and about prisons; and overall impact of being involved in this experiential learning program. Interviews were conducted by two formerly incarcerated collective members, three nonincarcerated W2B collective members, and one doctoral-level research assistant from the university. In addition, members of the W2B Collective (14 participants) engaged in “dyad interviews” in which they interviewed one another about their experience of participating in a W2B course. Thirty-seven students (58%) who had taken at least one W2B course (four courses had been offered at the time) were interviewed. Sixteen had taken a W2B class while incarcerated (these students are referred to as “inside” students), and 21 had taken it as part of their MSW degree (these students are referred to as “outside”

Table 1. Participant Demographics

No. of inside students	16
No. of outside students	21
No. of inside students who had taken more than one course	6
No. of outside students who had taken more than one course	1
Sentence length of inside students	4½ years to Life
Female	36
Male	1
Aboriginal	1
Afro-Canadian	7
Caucasian	22
Asian	7
Level of education: Outside	In 2-year MSW program
Highest level of education: Inside, high school	2
Highest level of education: Inside, some undergrad or college courses	9
Highest level of education: Inside, completed BA or college diploma	3
Highest level of education: Inside, unknown	2

Note. $N = 37$.

students). [Table 1](#) shows the participants' demographics. Interviews took place at the prison, in the community, and/or via Skype and lasted about 1½ hours.

After transcripts were professionally transcribed, several of the collective members who had conducted the interviews analyzed the transcripts and developed themes emerging from the interviews. The author coded the same transcripts and engaged in a "textual conversation" within the document whereby she commented on the themes the interviewer developed, and we went back and forth via e-mail, working together toward identification of broad analyses. This process was limited to collective members who were not incarcerated because people in prison have no access to internet/email and our access to the collective members inside was limited to biweekly visits. We coanalyzed about one third of the transcripts this way. (Please See Pollack & Eldridge, 2015 for further discussion of the collaborative research process). We also brought excerpts from the transcripts into the prison for the collective to analyze. Collective members worked with the excerpts, breaking into small groups and discussing the quotes, collectively developing and refining categories and themes.

This article reports on three of the themes emerging from the interviews about W2B classes: challenging stereotypes about the Other, learning with the whole self, and impact on commitment to social justice and action.

Findings

Challenging Stereotypes About 'The Other': "It Takes Away the Labels: Some People Are More Like You Than You Know"

Each group of students had different expectations and motivations for taking a W2B course. For inside students, the opportunity to take a university course was of interest because there is very little access to postsecondary classes in Canadian

jails and prisons. A significant barrier to accessing university classes is that prisoners are not permitted access to the Internet, and most university correspondence courses are online. All inside participants in this study said they applied for a W2B course to continue their education; they were motivated by the fact that the university provides a bursary for them to take the course, because classes were “in person” rather than by correspondence, and by the idea of studying with university students from the community. Some students had college/university experience prior to incarceration, and many did not. Outside students were enrolled in an MSW program and said they were motivated to take part because of the experiential and community-based learning approach and the collaborative approach to learning with people with lived experience of criminalization and incarceration. Both inside and outside students shared a common assumption and concern that there would be significant differences between the two groups of students. Participants stated that at the onset of the class their biggest concern was being judged—either for being “a criminal” or for being “privileged” and “naïve.” One outside student, for example, stated her concerns in the following way:

I remember, I guess maybe being self-conscious or a little bit insecure. Like, what are they going to think of me, are they going to judge me? I guess the idea of privilege came to mind. You know . . . I’m coming into this place every week, and I get to leave every week. What are they going to think of me because of that? Are they going to be like screw you, kind of thing, you get to leave? — Cooper

Inside students expressed particular concern that students from outside would think they were unintelligent and/or dangerous and that they would be regarded as “Other.” The following comments are illustrative of some of the initial concerns expressed by inside participants in this study.

[I thought] they would all look down upon us or down upon me, and be like, oh she’s an inmate, or she’s not smart because she ended up in jail. — Frances

. . . laugh at me if I speak the way I speak, or they’re going to make fun of me. — Sue

Most of us in the class figured that with the students coming in, the students would probably be like, White, middle-class students, coming in and looking down on us. — Chelsea

One of the main concerns raised by inside students was that the outside students would be studying and observing them as “criminals” rather than relating to them as co-learners who are in prison. For example,

Are they going to be here really to learn about the class, or are they just going to sit there and question our crimes and why we’re in here? — Chelsea

I felt that as an Inside student, I would be really observed. I felt that, even though the Outside students would have good intentions, they were kind of coming to watch us through a fish bowl and observe us. — Hannah

However, participants said that their fears and stereotypes dissipated during the first class. The first class of each W2B course is structured to begin building connections and allow students to experience one another in a relatively lighthearted manner. Through experiential activities such as the Wagon Wheel Icebreaker, a popular icebreaker used by group facilitators for team building (http://sli.oregonstate.edu/files/cce/reflection_facilitation_handbook.pdf), students meet each other in a fun and nonthreatening way. All participants identified this class and the Wagon Wheel activities as pivotal to breaking down barriers and dismantling stereotypes.

When talking about their experiences of how stereotypes and assumptions were challenged, the dominant theme arising in the interviews was the idea of being or feeling connected.

Any fears or stigmas we might have had were brought down. As an Inside student, I didn't feel like the outside students were staring at us, like an exhibit in a zoo. They just saw us as other students. They didn't know anything about our cases. They didn't know anything about why we're here. We're just other students working on the same program and discussing the same world issues. It was very liberating to feel a part of the world still —connected, even though we're behind walls. — Frances (inside student)

Feeling connected resulted in the dismantling of various labels and categories that tend to divide people from each other. Inside students started to see themselves as equally capable of completing a university course and to view outside students as also having experienced social, economic, and personal challenges. For example, Chica, an inside student, stated that initially she assumed that outside students “don't even know what I've been through. Nobody's even walked a quarter of a mile in my shoes”; but throughout the course she discovered that we “are more alike you than you know.” Similarly, some outside students reflected on the commonalities with some of their inside classmates and the realization that their own life trajectories could have also led them into conflict with the law. For example, Caitli stated,

For the first time [I saw myself] as someone who could quite easily be incarcerated, you know, at the drop of a hat . . . and I really was able to see it for the first time from the perspective of people inside, living in that system. It was life-changing.

Other outside students expressed similar realizations, including an awareness of how social processes can lead some women into conflict with the law:

All of those women in there, that could have been me. There are so many various different ways in which the trajectory of our lives can put us in that place. So just having that understanding and that knowledge, I feel like was one of the biggest things I walked away with from the class. — Nelly

And it really hit me that if circumstances in my life were tweaked slightly, that I could very much be on the inside. It struck me—the commonality. Not the

difference, but how alike everything was, and how connected I was to the entire system of it all. — Alex

Many times, especially through the relationships that I built, I thought to myself, wow if I had gotten caught for x-y-z actions, I could have very well been in someone else's shoes, and I could have very well been incarcerated. So those degrees of separation that I think society tells us need to be there were absolutely blurred. — Rachel

If there was one thing in my life that was different, like one minor thing, it could quite be possible that I could be inside. — Shorty

In summary, one of the key impacts of taking a W2B class on both groups was the connections and relations created between two groups of students who are not normally considered “peers” and the development of a learning community between and across these differences. The notions that the class “takes away the labels” and that “some people are more like you than you know” were common sentiments expressed by participants in this study. The personal connections and teaching pedagogy were identified as central to the process of becoming aware of and dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions that prevent authentic connections between those who are and are not incarcerated.

Holistic Learning: “It’s Not Even What I Learned—It Was Who I Became”

Participants’ responses about the impact of taking a W2B class were striking in terms of the far-reaching effects of a one-semester course. They spoke of the impact on their self-esteem, sense of belonging, family relationships, personal agency, attitudes, and behavior. The circle pedagogy and learning from one another’s personal life experiences were key factors leading to personal growth that went beyond the classroom context itself. For most participants, with the exception of those who were Indigenous, the circle was a new learning modality. Students highlighted the equalizing effects of the circle and the significance of having the opportunity to hear and speak a diverse set of opinions without fear of reprisal or judgment.

A freeing principle of the circle is that you don’t have to feel like you’re being singled out or put on the spot in any way. I found that the Walls to Bridges circle experience was incredibly empowering because it accounted for those power dynamics. — Caitli (outside student)

No one’s better than anybody else. . . . We were all learning from each other. There was no one person that was like, okay I’m the boss. Nothing like that. It was all equal. It was everyone had their chance to speak and say their opinion on how they felt about the readings or what they had learned or if they had researched something. I really enjoyed it. I’m already going to be judged. I have a criminal record. . . . For the people that are from the outside coming in, and for them to be able to look at us in, like, not under any kind of lens—that was really cool. — Jessica (inside student)

I felt that, having the circle format, I was able to listen to different people and learn from different people. And there's still the leader and sort of setting the format, but it really opened up to everybody as teachers and everybody as learners, and I really liked that. — Beth (outside student)

A repetitive theme through the interviews, from both inside and outside students, was the idea of “finding a voice.”

I felt encouraged and I felt respected, so it made me very comfortable very quickly, and I was very surprised. I felt my voice grew. Like, every class I went to, I had more to say, and I felt comfortable saying it. Whereas, in previous university settings, I rarely spoke and rarely put up my hand, you know what I mean? I was afraid of that competitive aspect, so a lot of things went unsaid. And I never really voiced my opinion. — Hannah (inside student)

I learned a lot about myself. I learned how important it is to be present. I learned to trust my own voice and that it's okay to express my voice. I learned about all kinds of assumptions that I carry and how that inevitably will impact how I interact with the world, and how the world interacts with me. — Racheal (outside student)

The circle work and the facilitative, rather than authoritative, role of the instructor created a space in which students were able to reflect not only on the subject matter but on their own place in the world, assumptions, and ways of relating to others.

I realized that this really helped me as a person. It's not even what I learned—it was who I became. — Caitline (inside student)

The notion of “bringing our authentic self” permeates circle work and W2B classes. Students stated that the noncompetitive environment and the integrative or holistic nature of the learning—weaving together personal experience, spirituality, academic theory, and emotions—facilitated a deeper learning experience than in conventional classrooms. Similar to the idea just expressed by Caitline, other students alluded to the notion that these classes fostered a space “to be a human, rather than to be like an intellectual brain” or was “relationship-based rather than content-based,” leading to a sense that their learning was a holistic process.

You did the academic work kind of before class, but then actually in class was connecting . . . kind of drawing a link between the academics with what's real life. And people's personal experiences, and their emotions, and what they've lived through. — Grace (outside student)

We had to present ourselves with a certain level of honesty and integrity. The classroom environment was particularly different and it explored how we could be more human while presenting our ideas. — Jose (outside student)

Students emphasized the significance of being permitted to bring their full selves into the classroom, drawing upon knowledge that comes from lived experience as well as from academic texts.

If I hadn't had my own experiences to apply them to, I may not have understood the concepts, because it was very different. — Barbara (inside student)

We all have differences in us. That's just the way we are made up—our life experiences, our genetic makeup, culture, religion, sex—all the isms you might want to think of, we're all different. This type of learning experience embraces those differences. It doesn't highlight them and it doesn't make them an ugly thing. It just makes them something that we have and something that we bring. — Chica (inside student)

The comments in this section reflect the sense that the W2B pedagogy is holistic and noncompetitive, integrating “book learning” with lived experience. Students who had experience with other college or university courses felt their “voice” was valued in the W2B classroom because they did not have to regurgitate material that the professor presented and were encouraged to think carefully about their own opinions and assumptions, where they come from, and how they have developed. Students said that the circle format, which involves listening quietly and carefully to each person's words, revealed many different perspectives, experiences, and ways of seeing and knowing, which they felt fostered a more nuanced and a deeper understanding of the course concepts than do lectures and PowerPoint presentations. Further, the abilities to draw upon lived experiences and to explore these with their peers within the analytical framework of the course were considered “transformative.”

Commitment to Social Justice and Action

Students frequently used the word *community* to refer to a sense of interconnectedness, accountability, and shared purpose that they felt evolved through the class. Maline, an outside student, spoke of the transformative impact of the classroom space as “a community in an unlikely place with unlikely people,” and Rachel, also an outside student, stated, “I never felt like I was really connecting with anyone” until taking a W2B class. It was the experience of developing a community in the classroom based on shared goals and respect for multiple perspectives and differences that seemed to provide a catalyst toward change. As Rachel stated, the experience of connection in the W2B classroom “taught me to feel what it's like to be in a community and how important that sense of community is for social justice.”

Although some students did reflect on what they learned from particular course content, for the most part it was the class process itself that produced a new or renewed commitment to social action. A strong theme throughout the interviews was the idea of “taking action” or “being part of the solution” toward reducing social inequalities. Particularly striking was the sense expressed by many students that their awareness of various forms of local and global social inequalities led them to feeling accountable for making

change in their own communities (whether the prison community or the “free” community). For some students, the impetus to work for change was oriented toward the criminal justice system.

I can honestly say I didn’t know this [how prison life is] existed. And you’re starting to wonder, how can I make things better? How can I not be a part of the problem? How can I be a part of the solution? ... I have the opportunity to change so many things when I leave this place (prison)... It’s just an eye-opener. — Becca (inside student)

I think that I have a greater awareness now of what some of the issues are in prison systems. I have a greater interest when I hear things in the media or in the news when I see issues come up that are related to incarceration, related to criminal justice. I just have a very new sense of investment, of interest, and passion really about trying to be part of creating more social justice. — Caitli (outside student)

Other participants articulated a commitment to alleviating marginalization and engaging in social change efforts and spoke of how the classroom experience rippled out into other communities (like the prison compound or their workplace) of which they were a part. A frequently cited ripple effect of taking part in W2B courses was a sense of responsibility to work toward social change in their various settings, a sense that they had a voice and the ability to break down other types of barriers placed between people.

It gave me a new perspective on not just what I knew in here, but what was going on outside. It even helped me to start watching the news more, because I was more involved and wanting to change this. Or I felt like this wasn’t right or what can we do to make this better? — Chelsea (inside student)

[We were] having a conversation about community accountability and lots of hopeless feelings about the way power is misused in our society. ... I remember one of my inside classmates just saying, you know, “We have to be the ones to hold them accountable, and we have to hold each other accountable. Like, it’s up to us.” ... It was kind of like one of those light bulb moments ... It’s our responsibility. — Michelle (outside student)

When I get my opportunity to leave the institution and go out and do something more with my life, it would be more dedicated to looking at fighting legislation and advocating more for people who are marginalized. — Chica (inside student)

What is my role in trying to either alleviate oppression or in perpetrating oppression? You know, what responsibility do I have? ... Not only what responsibility do I have, but how can I convert that into action? — Alex (outside student)

In summary, participants said that the course content and process of creating a community fostered a sense of personal accountability to work toward change. The lived experience aspect of the courses dovetailed with course content and allowed students to analyze and reflect upon the larger social dynamics and structures that influence people’s experience of the criminal justice system. The shared purpose of learning and talking across

social barriers was an additional aspect of how community was created. The resulting sense of connection and analysis provoked a collective commitment to social justice and action.

Conclusion

The pedagogical design and process of W2B aims to create a space in which issues such as diversity, marginalization, privilege, and oppression can be explored both academically and experientially. Some of the common challenges encountered by students and instructors in teaching this material appear to be mediated by the experiential nature of the W2B program, through studying with incarcerated women as co-learners or peers and the circle pedagogy process. The integrative and experiential pedagogy was viewed by students in the study as the central factor in their learning. Participants emphasized the significance of bringing their whole selves to the learning endeavor and of reflecting consciously and experientially about labels and categories that confine how we think about ourselves and others (such as “professional,” “student,” “criminal”). Results of this study indicate that W2B courses helped to dispel stereotypes, create a sense of connection and community across perceived differences, and cultivate a drive for social action, both within the criminal justice system and in the wider community.

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