

“Living More Through Knowing More”: College Education in Prison Classrooms

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journals.sagepub.com/home/aeq**Meghan Elizabeth Kallman¹** 

Abstract

A growing national focus on prison reform has led to a resurgence of interest in carceral education. However, and although college education in prison is different from college education in the community, relatively little scholarship has explored why or how these variations exist, what they mean, or how they have changed over time. The present paper aims to help fill this gap, exploring the significance of this context for adult learning. I ask: how does the context of a prison shape classroom dynamics and student learning? In answering the question, I employ qualitative and ethnographic methods that focus on giving voice to the perspective of the student-inmates themselves. I find that the isolated and oppressive characteristics of the prison can, paradoxically, offer unique opportunities for learning and scholarly achievement among incarcerated students. The paper’s findings invite reflection about the types of educational strategies often employed in prisons, and provide baseline data on some important social dynamics within prison classrooms.

Keywords

prison, adult education, collective learning, carceral education

I got a nine-year-old son, so he asks me questions. I haven’t been stumped by him yet about a question, so that means I know enough to teach my son. And my son thinks I’m a genius, even though I’m not [. . .] Where before, confidence for me was, “Who can I intimidate? How much money can I get?” Now I feel confident in myself, because I’m not a dummy in my book. I know! I know a lot about the streets, but I also know a lot about other things.

—Paul¹, Medium-Security.

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Introduction and Problem Statement

The United States has the largest prison population in the world (Sentencing Project, 2019). As of this writing, the U.S. criminal justice system holds nearly 2.3 million people, distributed across 1,719 state prisons, 109 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,163 jails, and 80 Indian Country jails. These facilities are in addition to military prisons, immigration detention facilities, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in U.S. territories (Sawyer & Wagner, 2019). Within an evolving national conversation on the causes, mechanisms, and consequences of a carceral state, and a growing focus on prison reform, there has also been a renewed interest in prison education (Annamma, 2016; Runell, 2018; Spycher, Shkodriani, & Lee, 2012).

Much literature on prison education examines its effects on recidivism (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013; Gray, 2010). A smaller portion explores how prison education spaces can produce critical and reflective spaces in the context of total institutions (cf. Kallman, 2018; McCorkel, 1998; J. Thomas, 1983; Williams, 2016). However, and although teaching and learning at the college level in prison is manifestly different from teaching and learning in the community, relatively little scholarship has looked at why or how these variations exist, or what they mean for instruction (but cf. McKee & Clements, 2000; Messemer, 2003, 2007). The present article aims to help fill this gap. I ask, how does the context of a prison shape classroom dynamics and learning among incarcerated college students? I argue that the isolating and oppressive characteristics of the prison can, paradoxically, offer unique opportunities for learning, and I detail how that occurs. My analysis employs qualitative and ethnographic methods that give voice to the student-inmates themselves. The article's findings invite reflection about educational strategies often employed in prisons and provide baseline data on important social dynamics within prison classrooms.

Background: College in Prison

Incarcerated people in the United States have been taking college-credit courses via correspondence at least since the 1920s, but programs became widespread after 1972 and the introduction of the Pell Grant program. In 1965, there were only 12 degree programs offered in prisons nationwide; by 1976, after the Pell Grants were fully implemented there were 237; and by 1990, there were 772 across the country (McCarty, 2006). Pell Grants funded this sort of program until prison reform—specifically, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 and “tough on crime” discourses—ended that funding stream (Brooks, 1994). After this, student-inmates could no longer use Pell grant money to support college tuition. For much of the early 2000s, however, many states still offered in-house college programs, funded variously by the state and federal governments, nonprofit organizations, or universities (Messemer, 2003). But long-term budget cuts have taken their toll; in 2016, only 35% of state prisons in the United States

offered college-level courses; those programs served only 6% of incarcerated people in the country (Bender, 2018).

The financial and programmatic resources that do exist are typically valued for producing normatively positive outcomes *within the institutions themselves*. Prison education programs are associated with an increased ability to respond to conflicts verbally and intellectually rather than with physical violence among incarcerated students (O'Neil, 1990), and fewer disciplinary violations throughout incarceration (Gerber & Fritsch, 1995). They are also thought to minimize security risks in prisons by relieving monotony and reducing reoffending (Farley & Pike, 2016).

Related, prison education can produce a host of desirable outcomes *for society as a whole*. Ex-offenders face many challenges during reentry, ranging from housing and employment struggles (Bushway, Stoll, & Weiman, 2007) to strained relationships with kin and social supports (Winnick & Bodkin, 2009). Education programs can produce positive shifts in some of these dynamics: education improves the employment prospects for formerly incarcerated people (Blomberg, Bales, Mann, Piquero, & Berk, 2011; Foley & Gao, 2004); furthermore, those who pursue education while incarcerated are more likely to continue on release (Davis et al., 2013). A meta-analysis found that individuals who participated in prison education programs were 43% less likely to recidivate compared with those who did not (Davis et al., 2013; see also Gray, 2010). Furthermore, educational programs can reduce stigma (including self-stigma), leading to positive postrelease outcomes (Evans, Pelletier, & Szkola, 2017). Despite these positive outcomes, college programs remain the most vulnerable to budget cuts of any type of prison education program in the United States (McCullum, 1994).

The character and pedagogies of prison education also reflect of social and political shifts over time. As prison education gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s, John McKee developed the Individually Prescribed Instructional System (IPIS; cf. McKee, 1970, 1974; McKee & Clements, 2000), specifically for incarcerated students. This behaviorist approach (Boghossian, 2006) emphasized modifying student-inmate's observable outcomes (and was consequently well-received by corrections administrators). It consists of discrete, programmed learning modules to respond to students' individual needs, consistent with adult learning theories that emphasize self-direction and self-pacing (Brockett, Hiemstra, & Hiemstra, 2018; Merriam, 2001). The overwhelming conclusion of it, and other behaviorist research, is that motivation is enhanced by success and diminished by failure; that the more successful people are, the more motivated they are (McKee, 1998; McKee & Clements, 2000). The IPIS model was institutionalized across correctional learning in the United States for quite some time.

More recently, and as critiques of the prison system writ large have emerged (cf. Alexander, 2012; Brewer & Heitzeg, 2008), a smaller body of literature has begun to explore how teaching and learning is enacted in prison spaces, particularly in college coursework that emphasizes critical thinking over basic skills (e.g., reading or writing). The goal of education becomes less about performance, and more about critical engagement and meaning making in the context of a "total institution" (Goffman, 1961). Based largely in (implicit or explicit) critical pedagogy (cf. Kincheloe, 2008)

and humanistic approaches, this strand of research takes for granted—albeit often tacitly—that education can be a “specific site of political struggle in the era of mass incarceration” (Scott, 2013, p. 23) and an instrument of change in the lives of incarcerated people (Michals & Kessler, 2015). Critical perspectives reject the idea that knowledge is politically neutral; rather, teaching is an inherently political act that fosters emancipation through an awakening of critical consciousness. Most postsecondary educators within this vein use some form of Freirean pedagogy (Costelloe, 2014; Flores, 2012; Freire, 2017; Kilgore, 2011; McCarty, 2006). This research largely focuses on the development of critical capacity within disciplines, including sociology (Kallman, 2018; Parrotta & Thompson, 2011), music (Cohen & Wilson, 2017), the arts (Williams, 2016), and creative writing (Appleman, 2013).

This article builds on the second strand of literature, empirically exploring how prison contexts shape classroom dynamics and learning. It argues that prisons can provide important critical spaces that—paradoxically—are both a product of, and enabled by, the very things that make them oppressive.

Methods, Respondents, and Setting

This article draws on my own experience teaching 10 community college courses in a state prison over six semesters, and qualitative interviews with former students.

As an inductive study focused on theory-building and social mechanisms (cf. Locke, 2007), this article developed conceptually over the course of my teaching. That is, being an educator served in many ways the same function as participant observation in a conventional ethnography would. Five of my classes were *Introductory Sociology*; three were an advanced class entitled *Social Problems*, and two were on globalization. In four semesters, I taught exclusively at men’s facilities (either Medium or Maximum security), and in two semesters, I taught both at a men’s facility, as well as in a blended class of women from the Minimum/Medium/Maximum facilities. Classes ran the length of a college semester elsewhere—typically 15 weeks. Men make up 93% of incarcerated people in the United States (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018), and therefore were overrepresented in my student body—and correspondingly, among my interlocutors. The sampling frame for women was so small as to only be suggestive. Thus, data are confined to analysis of men’s facilities.

The conceptual contours of this article emerged from my own practice of teaching, about which I kept notes and observations from the first day of class. These notes served as both observational and documentary data. I analyzed them as I did transcriptions, and my experience of teaching served to orient both my perspective and my interview schedule. They were supplemented by 12 fully voluntary, open-ended, semi-structured interviews. All respondents were former students. Interviews were only conducted after students had completed their courses. However, as their former instructor I had a high level of rapport, which permitted for detailed and thoughtful interviews after the semester(s) ended.

My students were enrolled in community college courses financed through the Special Education Program in the U.S. Department of Education which lets them earn

subsidized Associate's degrees while incarcerated. They totaled approximately 200, ranging in age from about 19 years to about 60 years (the majority were somewhere between 25 and 50 years). They were serving sentences from several years to life; although I was not informed of the circumstances that led to their incarceration and chose not to find out, stories invariably emerged throughout the semester. Incarcerated men in the United States are often people of color (Raphael, 2006), poor, and experience radically higher rates of trauma than the general population (Carlson & Shafer, 2010; Miller & Najavits, 2012; Saxon et al., 2001; Wolff & Shi, 2012)—and most within my class fit this profile. Related, most entered my classroom having had negative formative experiences with education. Some had only completed their GEDs while incarcerated, having either been excluded from, or avoided, formal education in other settings.² They arrived suspicious of their colleagues and authority figures—including me—and deeply divided along racial lines (see also Phillips, 2012).

These things—and the fact that I was a relatively young White woman—all shaped the dynamics in my classroom. I found that it was best to confront those dynamics immediately, by setting expectations verbally about how we would engage each other and the material. Behavior is tightly controlled and regulated in a total institution, and deviation from norms is discouraged and punishable. Students were initially apprehensive about the seminar-like feel of a classroom; they worried that they would do or say something “wrong” and be punished. I discussed expectations directly on the first day of class and throughout the semester: yes, you are encouraged to express opinions that diverge from others'. You do not need to raise your hand, although you must wait until your colleagues finish speaking. I made explicit choices to require a great deal of reading and writing, both to help students probe the breadth of their abilities (which were almost universally greater than they anticipated), and to demonstrate respect for their intellectual capacity.

Interview respondents, as a subset of students, were incarcerated in the medium-security facility of the state prison, and they ranged in age from 21 to 59 years, with the bulk in their early to mid-20s, serving sentences ranging from several years to double-life. Approximately 70% were men of color and 30% White. Ten interviews were conducted with former students who were still incarcerated and two with a student postrelease. Recruitment occurred through the community college liaison, who contacted the pool of eligible students and scheduled them for interviews, based largely on availability. Interviews occurred in the dining hall in off-times, and occasionally in empty classrooms, over a period of nearly a year. As college students, respondents were consented through written forms. This project was approved both by the university's institutional review board and the department of corrections research unit.

Data coding is an integral part of qualitative data analysis (see also Weston et al., 2001). This project relied on methods of grounded coding, which emphasize theory development that occurs simultaneously with data collection (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Grounded theorists construct levels of abstraction directly from the data, conducting additional readings to refine emerging analytic categories. This process culminates in an abstract theoretical understanding of a studied experience—a “grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 3-4) that can be tested empirically in other settings.

Indeed, this article began when I noticed a pattern of behavior within my classroom that differed meaningfully from classes outside prisons.

Grounded coding is particularly useful when working with marginalized populations whose experiences are often distorted or omitted entirely by mainstream accounts: it begins with research subjects' own lives, rather than with a set of hypotheses that may be susceptible to bias or distortion. An initial data reading helped me identify broad themes in the experiences of incarcerated college students. Secondary readings helped me refine those broad themes into more precise codes (e.g., mechanisms by which communal interactions shape learning). This iterative process permitted me to build an analysis that both developed from, and remained tightly bound to, data (Eisenhardt, 1989).

Results

I argue here that prison context shapes student learning in three specific ways: on the individual level, in a communal/peer-to-peer context, and in student–instructor interactions.

Theme 1: Individual Learning

The first striking finding is that many interlocutors experienced a new, individual commitment to learning through their college coursework in prison. Many of them had been unsuccessful, unhappy, and/or underperforming in their early education experiences (see also R. G. Thomas, 2012). The reasons for this vary; most are undoubtedly structural in origin, although students in this study often attribute their inconsistent attendance at school “on the street” to a personal shortcoming. (As one said of his grade-school experience, he “never took it serious, never took advantage of [teachers’] help until I came in here.”) Another student—a young Black man whom I have called Samuel—explains that prison has afforded him the time and space to become a student:

[In high school] I was like “I want to be done with school already. I want to be a grown up. I want to do this, I want to do that.” So I got my GED at a young age. I was running around the streets basically by myself, because all my friends were in school, know what I mean? I was running around with older people, hanging out with older people. And then when I started going to school again, in here, I actually started liking it more than I did as a kid. Maybe I was more mature too, but I liked it more than I did when I was a kid. And I still do, and I want to continue it when I go home . . .

For Samuel, college in prison has given his education a reboot. Paradoxically, the highly isolated environment of the prison offers perspective on the world that many student-inmates report having not had during their time on the street, and supportive educational environments can help foster a connection to learning (see also McKee & Clements, 2000). Jeremy, a White man in his early 20s, says as follows:

I'm starting to learn more about things that I had no idea ever even existed or was a part of the world that I thought was life. [. . .] So it just made me think, like—I was so little, and the world was so small, and I really thought like, the 'hood *was what life was*. And [. . .] never really leaving the state. And classes have taught me about other parts of the environment, other parts of the world, history. And I just realized there was so much to learn. The more I learned, the more I realized that I don't know enough yet.

The highly confined space of the prison expanded his world, including his assessment of history and geography. Another young man offers a very similar assessment:

There's power in knowledge, just knowing things. [. . .] The more I know, the more confident I feel in myself, how to deal with things. Like, I could take a class, learn something in the class and I see that something on TV and be able to respond to it or understand what's going on. The more I learn, whether it's my vocabulary getting bigger because of the words I'm learning in the class, or math, it's expanded my knowledge. It's making me more confident. I feel like I'm *living* more because I *know* more.

This notion that knowledge makes one feel more alive affirms that education can offer positive emotional and social benefits, regardless of context. For both students, classes offer a window into the array of social, political, and economic issues in the world—despite physical confinement. Jeremy adds,

You come to prison—it's not good to be in here, but one of the positives is it puts education right there. So whether you're just using it [to help with parole] or not, once you get introduced you're still making it useful.

Even if education is imposed, it can still foster a focus on learning. Although students clearly express that prison is “not good,” regret does not emerge as a justification for learning, as it has elsewhere (cf. Hall & Killacky, 2008).

As much as students recommit to education, they can also develop very sophisticated study skills. In general, incarcerated students have a great deal of time on their hands. Though prison days are tightly choreographed, most student-inmates with whom I interacted reported that they engaged their studies very carefully because they have plenty of time in which to do so—usually in the evenings after they are locked in their cells (called “rooms” by the people here) for the evening.

Janus, a man of color in his 30s who has served two prison terms and who reports having been a strong student in high school, explicitly connects the solitude and isolation of the prison environment to his desire to study. Janus had been released by the time we spoke, and he offered his insights over the clink of silverware at a coffee shop:

In [prison], everything's told to you, your whole schedule is made for you. . . . So what do you have that makes you feel good? It's either a win or a loss. Did you win today? Did you get a letter? Did you win your chess game? Did you win your basketball game? Did you pick up a bigger amount of weight [at the gym]? Or: did you *learn* something? Those are all considered wins. So you try to get up every day and follow your schedule and win. So college is a win. It's amazing. [. . .] It's a lifeline.

Janus continues: “I did two prison terms in my life and every time I come out, I’m 10 times a better reader.” He reports having read 200 books in a 3-year sentence and spending the entirety of his commissary account on books while incarcerated. “I had to borrow soup,” he said (referring to instant soup cups from the commissary with which inmates supplement their meals), “while I waited for my books.” When he entered prison, he recounts, “reading was a way to escape myself. So the more I did it, the more I wasn’t in jail. Same thing with college.” For Janus, reading and learning enables him to transcend his surroundings. Samuel says,

On the street [. . .] you don’t really get to time or the solitude that you need to reflect on life and reflect on perspectives, even your school work. So, over here, your mind is constantly running. [. . .] So I feel like you really come into yourself in prison. That’s why so many people change, and really find out about life. Because I came in at such a young age—when I was out I didn’t really care about nothing, you know, I would get by and not think about nothing. But in here I had to concentrate on myself, better myself . . .

Space for introspection is oddly present in a prison experience, as he points out. Samuel continues,

I kind of call it like a “near death experience,” because I’m facing two life sentences at 19 years old, so I feel like I got an opportunity to really re-evaluate life. And I know that the only thing that can really help is education. So I feel like when I was in the street, I was doing AP classes, I was doing all of that, but I didn’t put my all into it because I knew, alright, I have a Plan B. And my Plan B wasn’t as good as what it should’ve been! But in here, the only plan I have is education. Without that, then I’m gonna be idle and get into trouble, so I feel like it was like a wakeup call, you know?

For Morry, a Black man in his 20s, prison provided an opportunity to focus on learning:

When you’re out in the street, your life is so fast paced, you have everything going on, you have to do other things, you have responsibilities. But when you come here, your only responsibility is to keep yourself out of trouble and try to learn things.

Morry and Samuel’s descriptions of prison as unexpected opportunity for introspection and study mirrors scholarly experiences in more traditional university settings. Students have a frequently unlooked-for experience of deepening their learning practices. The socioemotional environment—both the physical space and the need for emotional escape—can foster particularly deep learning.

Theme 2: Communal Interactions in Learning

The commitment to individual study among incarcerated students is bolstered by an unusual degree of communal interaction. This issue has been left virtually unexplored

in scholarship. I find that collective learning can be particularly impactful for two concurrent reasons: learning becomes a community effort and learning becomes an avenue for tolerance, outcomes that matter both for the individual student and for the prison as a whole.

Students almost universally valued the opportunity to have conversations about sociology and its application to their lives, and the content of the course (things like social class and immigration) likely helped enliven classes, intrinsically. These findings resonate with other studies of adult learners, who find that adult students particularly are highly engaged in conversations about practical or lived issues (Hill, 2014). Yet alongside the interest in course material comes a surprising classroom dynamic: learning in prison is often more a communal practice than an individual one. Dario, a Latino man in his mid-30s says,

I mean my whole thing [in prison] is to mind my business. Don't pay attention to anything. And that's how you survive. Like, if someone's bugging, you turn your back and walk away. [. . .] Well, I think the classroom kind of dissolves that mind-set. Because you could enter and just be like, "Yeah, I'm gonna mind my business and not say anything." But then someone says something [interesting], or someone makes a move, and you want to make a move. Or you don't believe what they're saying, and you want to right it. But the only way to right it would be intellectually! So you come back and say how you feel, or why they're wrong. And that resolves all of that, "mind your business" stuff. Now it's an organic place for debate.

This comment contrasts with the prevailing American mind-set that education is an *individual* process and the building of intellectual capital is an individual-level attribute. For incarcerated students, learning becomes a collective process, and educational capital is built intersubjectively. This "organic place for debate" has lasting consequences outside the classroom because it gives students a new way of thinking about *each other* and may connect groups within the prison. Dario continues, "And it definitely changes [your relationships with others] because you walk by the guy in the yard and it's like, 'Hey, that's the smart guy!'"

Additionally, because there is less of a danger of a physical fight in a classroom than in the yard, students can be willing to tackle each other intellectually in daring and profound ways. Jayden, a Black man in his late 20s, offers similar reflections:

Over here you're forced to be near each other, so you're forced to see, "Yo, somebody that's white is no different from me." They might like the same sports as you, same type of girls, same food, even though they're from a whole different neighborhood, they could still hold a lot of things in common with you. So then you put us in the same class, and you allow us to interact with each other. But your class creates a neutral environment, where if this was in the mod [housing unit], then the chances of it escalating are higher. Where in a classroom, because you're in there so people are gonna, like, tailor their words, a lot more swearing is gonna be left out, aggressiveness is gonna be left out. [. . . B]ecause it's crazy how your environment can control that! [. . .] Some things are too

delicate, but because that class setting, and you're there, and people want to be respectful of you, so that's a perfect environment.

Here, physical safety and intellectual risk-taking are linked (which, paradoxically, may be why some students were less comfortable in traditional schools). The reference to me suggests that having someone present who is external to the prison can help—and that as a woman, I was perhaps afforded an increased degree of decorum. As a teacher, I was clearly committed to my students' learning; as an outsider in gender and incarceration status, I had a distance from the stakes of the debate that enabled me to facilitate “delicate” conversations.

Marlon, a middle-aged White man, spent a large part of our conversation reflecting on the racial tensions that exist in this prison, as they do in others. He concluded that classes offered opportunity to engage in difficult race conversations:

I've been in prisons where you could die from the color of your skin and not have to say anything. So there's things you would never want to bring up in a class [. . .] And, here, at least we're allowed to discuss it, and it helps us see from a point of view of, “yeah, that guys getting kind of heated about it. I wonder why.” And, we can see where he's coming and sympathize or empathize with it, and say, “Okay, I see where he's coming from with that.” So, that helps.

These findings emerge among respondents of different ages and races, suggesting that the process at work here are somewhat generalizable. Morry articulates a hugely important pattern—that learning often becomes a uniquely communal experience in prison that is driven, in part, by the fact that students are forced together for long periods of time within a total institution:

When I was out in the street I was taking my GED. And when I was taking my GED I was pretty much by myself, even though I was in the classroom full of people. And everybody's usually focused on their own life, and passing, and doing all the things, but when you come to jail, it's more of a community learning. You can learn with each other, and people teach you things . . .

This community dynamic becomes particularly important in absence of a research library and the Internet—absences that characterize many prisons in the country. Samuel says,

On the street [. . .] I started classes at [the community college], but partway into the [semester] I ended up coming to jail. And while I was in the class it seemed like I was the outsider, it was like “fend for yourself,” kind of. In here [. . .] it's like nobody wants to see you fail. Nobody wants to see you down—even if they don't like you. So it's more of a community effort.

Samuel experiences solidarity among incarcerated students as a commitment to each other's success. Colin, a Black man in his late forties who held a technical job

before he was incarcerated, observes that important community support occurs in informal tutoring among student-inmates. He has tutored many younger men in their GEDs and throughout community college classes. For Colin, informal tutoring is how he makes meaning out of his sentence: “They come to me,” he says, “and it makes me feel like people appreciate me for my abilities.” Colin reflects that working with younger students “makes me feel like I’m someone. Because you can fall through the cracks here.” And that, he says, “is where the community comes in.” Given the high levels of inmate-to-inmate educational support, he believes, “in jail there’s no reason you shouldn’t be getting As.” The community holds each individual learner to a high standard.

In this setting, group experiences in education can help students be, as we have seen (a) good students and (b) more accepting of difference. This unlikely outcome occurs both because of, and in spite of, the rigid, oppressive, and stratified environment of the prison itself.

Theme 3: Teacher–Student Dynamics

The teacher–student educational dynamics emerge within the data in two main ways: in how students and teachers engage each other in the context of a class, and in how students engage complex material in their studies.

Facilitating Respect. Students reported consistently that college classes are spaces in which they feel able to both offer and receive *respect*, a finding that is resonant with other work on the emancipatory potential of critical spaces (McCorkel, 1998). My respondents reported that classroom settings permitted a sort of democratizing of interaction that they did not feel throughout the rest of their lives in prison. Morry reports that the conversational, seminar-like classes help him feel more like an adult:

[In school] in here you’re treated with more respect. As an adult. Especially [in] college classes, yeah, you’re treated as an adult. I see a little bit more respect in prison [than in community college on the street]. And as far as education with the instructors, and I really can’t pinpoint what it is, but I feel more included. Being not talked *to*, but like I’m having conversations *with* that person.

This respect is especially important given the high levels of emotional isolation and the dehumanizing social processes of the total institution itself. Janus links classroom conversation with students’ unmet needs for mentorship and attention:

Inmates, we’re so forgotten about. So everybody wants the chair to speak [in class]. So in a setting when you’re trying to teach, everybody needs their personal attention. So in a class environment in the [prison] or wherever, it’s going to take more one-on-one [. . .] because [people] need attention. And have you always noticed, even when we was in class, there’s always one guy who needs to say his thing? And it’s not because he’s

arrogant or ignorant. It's because you're the only one listening, and he's been waiting all week for you.

The therapeutic function of writing and speaking is plainly evident, and can also help explain the unusually community-oriented style of learning that incarcerated students often create among themselves. There is virtually nobody in a prison setting responsible for bearing witness to the acquisition of new ideas and of learning—except for teachers and other students. Incarcerated people have limited access to family, no social support systems, no professional or occupational identity, and only very sparse mental health services. Teachers, therefore, become the next best thing: someone linked to the outside world who will take their perspectives seriously.

Janus' observation dovetails with my own; I was surprised at the depth and detail of the stories that students told in class, or that they shared in their weekly written homework. I was initially unprepared for the amount of trauma that would be exposed by way of their participation in class and in their writing—accounts of deaths, physical and sexual abuse, trafficking, neglect, and gang life, all rendered by hand on lined loose-leaf torn from notebooks. At first, I wondered at the intimacy of these narratives. It eventually became clear that grappling with their stories helped students engage the course material—gang life stories helped illustrate concepts of social organization, and accounts of abuse can shed light on the social construction of gender. But telling these stories also helped students process and make sense of their experiences. As Janus put it: “I can't really have a constructive conversation with too many people. So, I go to class and I can talk with a teacher.”

Rigor and Capacity. Because of students' commitment to education and the increased empathy that collective learning can foster, many report that they value rigorous teaching and wish for more of it. I found that introductory sociology students could not just apprehend, but rapaciously devour, advanced texts (notable examples include the entirety of David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* and Karl Polanyi's *Great Transformation*). Predictably then, respondents complained that the quality of instruction in prison classes is generally low, and that they wanted more advanced learning opportunities. As Jayden observed,

They [prison education programs] are accommodating guys getting GEDs. The teaching curve drops. When there aren't good teachers, I lose my ambition to go into my room and get into my reading and get into conversations with myself.

Paul, a Black man in his late 20s, says,

Some teachers, they come in here and they're like, going through the motions. And because they don't hold us to a higher standard that they should, they let us slip through. And that's not gonna prepare us if we're really trying to pursue school, because then you're gonna go down when you're really getting introduced to how it really is. [. . .] I can see when the teacher is not holding the class, or myself, to a standard that should be held. Treat me like you would treat a student out there!

Paul feels that being “taught down to” will systematically disadvantage incarcerated students. He continues,

Society already built a picture of anybody who’s a criminal is most likely stupid, doesn’t know nothing about anything except criminal things, and like, they already painted a picture of where we’re at. And we’re at the bottom of the barrel, when that’s not the truth you know? There’s a lot of smart people in here, people that surprise me. [. . .] But you know, what happens is people start to believe that picture that’s painted about them, so they starts to live up to it.

Daniel, a White student in his mid-30s continues:

I felt like a lot of the classes kind of got almost dumbed down a little bit for the environment. I’m not a fan of that [. . .] It felt like a lot of times when people would give wrong answers, it was almost like teachers didn’t want to tell people they were wrong, almost. I seen that a lot.

These comments are consonant with other work finding that incarcerated students crave professionalism and higher levels of skill in their instruction (Hall & Killacky, 2008). In my experience, incarcerated students are as capable thinkers as nonincarcerated students—indeed, sometimes a great deal *more* capable—although they have radically different levels of confidence in their own abilities. Related, the prison structure and prison instructors are not universally prepared to accept and foster students’ abilities and skills, in no small part because of resource limitations (lack of books and little to no computer access), and lack of training. Similarly, students report a desire for a fuller complement of classes. Colin says,

What amazes me is the young guys getting their GEDs in here. I appreciate and respect the path of a young one getting his GED and moving on from there. But they are limited to move on to anything else because of the shortage of classes.

In sum, we can see that prison classrooms can foster an unusual commitment to and love for learning—often for the first time in students’ lives. They can also foster deep levels of interpersonal trust and connection, which manifest both in collective experiences of learning, and in high levels of peer-to-peer support and respect. Because of the first two social processes, incarcerated students have a high capacity for learning.

Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

As with all data, these data are particularistic. They were gathered at a certain time, organization, institutional culture, and region. And yet the characteristics of this state prison are similar to prisons elsewhere, in terms of demographics, hypermasculinity, and relative shortage of educational resources, suggesting that the theoretical mechanisms developed in this case may be useful elsewhere. From these findings flow both implications for the literature, and recommendations for improvements for college programs in prison.

First, the “advantages” of college in prison can tell us something meaningful about adult education generally. Students observe that being in prison affords them a level of space, concentration and focus that they didn’t have on the street; they reinforce the value of opportunities for scholarly focus among adult learners in the community. The specific—and paradoxical—contribution of this article to this conversation is to show how the oppressive characteristics of a prison can actually support student learning. This should not be taken as an endorsement of oppressive environments, but rather an endorsement of opportunities for learning in *all* environments. As educators and administrators, we must protect the time and space required for study, especially in demanding environments where many adult learners have simultaneous academic, professional, and familial responsibilities (Home, 1998).

The finding that that collective learning can create interpersonal accountability and support extraordinarily high achievement may be broadly applicable, and warrants further study. Perhaps most important, my findings on the collective nature of prison learning offer a new perspective on the highly institutionalized practices of individualized education in such settings (cf. McKee & Clements, 2000). Not only do they suggest that group work is a valuable pedagogical intervention, as has been widely recognized in other areas (Batra, Walvoord, & Krishnan, 1997; Gunderson & Moore, 2008), but also that peer-to-peer mentorship in adult education may provide continued benefit to incarcerated students. Despite the positive press that peer mentoring (deservedly) receives, this article also suggests that incarcerated students crave higher levels of professionalism among faculty, a finding that has emerged elsewhere (Hall & Killacky, 2008; Hill, 2014).

Finally, amid increased attention on racial and racialized violence of prison structures and in prison settings (Berg & DeLisi, 2006; Olson, 2016), it is also worth underscoring college-level courses’ capacity to increase understanding and break down barriers, particularly racial ones.

From these implications flow a number of policy recommendations. First, this research suggests that because of (a) the time and space that students have to dedicate to their studies, and (b) the critical reflection and community support that can bolster learning in a prison, incarcerated students are primed to achieve a great deal. Greater investments in both breadth and depth of classes would be beneficial; this research suggests that they would be taken seriously by incarcerated students and could potentially help remediate educational disparities between incarcerated and nonincarcerated adults.

Related, prison administrators may consider actively using college courses as a way to connect across difference. A final anecdote can triangulate the potential value of this approach (and showcase the type of creative thinking of which introductory sociology students are capable). Typically, in my courses, I assigned students ethnographic projects focusing on a setting from their daily experiences as their final exam. Unbeknownst to me, two students paired up and, instead of conducting an ethnography, ran a social experiment during their yard time. They recruited members of rival gangs to play on the same pickup basketball team (so the Blue team included members from Gang A, Gang B, and Gang C, and the Red team also included members from Gang A, Gang B,

and Gang C), and had the teams play against each other. They had someone else referee the game, and sat on the sidelines taking notes. Their final paper concluded that, for the duration of the game, teammate relationships were more important and more salient than gang relationships; they found that sports could temporarily disable life-and-death rivalries. In my data, classroom experiences can offer the same sort of temporary understanding. However, simple exposure to people of different backgrounds is not usually sufficient to permanently change students' attitudes; this kind of exposure needs to be accompanied by intentional reflection, sensemaking, and processing (Vande Berg, Connor-Linton and Paige 2009).

A final set of recommendations regards teachers and preparation for teaching in a prison environment. In my experience, there is no training for teachers entering prison settings beyond a security-focused facility orientation. Trauma-informed teaching strategies and trainings (Carello & Butler, 2014) may help instructors develop sensitive pedagogies for this group of adult learners, most of whom enter the classroom with histories of trauma. Because classes can be therapeutic for students and because students often share traumas through their schoolwork, prison educators are confronted with a great deal of pain. Listening to trauma narratives can increase the risk of vicarious traumatization (Figley, 2002); educators could thus benefit from resources to help them be prepared for, absorb and cope with the trauma narratives of our students. This, as well, has synergies with the emergent conversation on secondary trauma among educators (Caringi et al., 2015).

The data presented here are a strong endorsement of educational programs in prison: not only do they nourish educational attainment, but they invite students into respectful relationships with each other and with instructional faculty, in addition to offering credits and positive effects on postprison life. As one student concluded,

As sociolog[ists], you have to be able to process what you're seeing, but still try to like step outside of yourself so your judgments don't get in the way. Just observe things for what they are and figure them out. Because the deeper you get to understanding something, the closer you are to reality. And that's the point.

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Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Nearly 50% of incarcerated individuals have not earned a high school diploma, compared with 23% of the total U.S. population (Kirrsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 2002).

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