

- winner of the Pulitzer Prize for *W. E. B. Du Bois: A Biography* (New York: H Holt, 1994) and *W.E.B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919–1963* (New York: H Holt, 2001).
8. Incarceration rates for black Americans, especially black women, dropped from 2000 to 2009, while the rate of imprisonment for whites and Hispanics rose. But of the more than 100,000 women incarcerated in state or federal prisons, black women were still almost three times more likely to be in prison than white women in 2009, and black men were still incarcerated at more than six times the rate of white men. "Incarceration Rates for Blacks Have Fallen Sharply, Report Shows." *New York Times*. February 27, 2013: A12.
9. See especially N. H. Rafter, *Partial Justice: Women, Prisons and Social Control*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1990) and Beth E. Ritchie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

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# Liberation from University Education: A Lesson in Humility for a Helper

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## CHAPTER 6

Only what you have experienced yourself can be called knowledge.  
Everything else is just information.

Albert Einstein

On the first day of my Masters of Social Work degree, the faculty dean warned the students: "Don't let us school the humanity and humility out of you." Unfortunately, this is essentially what traditional education does. For most of my post-secondary education, I feigned professional conduct in an attempt to appear capable and competent, memorizing content and separating myself from the learning. Despite the alienation I felt, I was able to convince myself that I was learning and getting as much as I could out of higher education—until I participated in Inside-Out.

Ironically, the first time I allowed myself to feel vulnerable and show genuine emotion within the university context was inside a federal prison. I had the unique opportunity to study in Canada's first Inside-Out program during my initial semester of my Masters of Social Work degree. The experience informed my social work practice in every sphere and continues to do so. I have been changed. Looking at Inside-Out's lessons, this essay makes the case for including experiential learning models across university curricula.

Despite the dean's warning, I had found that traditional pedagogic practice contradicted the stated goals of the program. It emphasized expert knowledge. Large class sizes were impersonal, and the loudest, most assertive individuals dominated discussion space. Like many students, I confined myself to well-defined boundaries for fear of giving the *wrong* answer. My attempts to appear wholly professional had disconnected me from the material taught in class and the individuals I was meant to help. When I shared with my Inside-Out classmates my disappointment with my

graduate studies, it became apparent that, while my inside classmates live in cages, I have been educated in one.

In the fall of 2011, 17 students embarked on an experiential learning journey, also described by Kayla Follert and Jessie Rodger in chapter 14. The course, *Diversity, Marginalization and Oppression*, was required for the ten outside MSW students and was taken for undergraduate university credit by the seven inside students. As a class, we examined systemic injustices, the forces that perpetuate them, and their connections with our own lives. Along the way, I constantly asked myself, “why?” observing my personal reactions (or nonreactions) toward particular topics, readings, comments, classmates, or group dynamics. Taking time to be mindful in this way helped me reflect on my own biases. Informal moments of reflexivity were bolstered by the reflection that was built into the curriculum through discussion, group activities, and writing.

The structure of the Inside-Out classroom thus supported best practices in experiential education in which the learner must be actively involved, reflecting on the experience while applying analytical, decision-making, and problem-solving skills.<sup>1</sup> Sitting in the circle, I could see each one of my classmates’ faces at any time. We were not separated by tables nor could we avoid eye contact by furiously trying on laptops. The classroom etiquette echoed the Aboriginal Seven Grandfather Teachings (respect, love, bravery, humility, honesty, wisdom, and truth), a holistic approach in keeping with the less formalized, Socratic nature of this experiential learning process. One of the main expectations of our class was that each person would come ready to contribute and be open-minded to whatever form the process would take. The underlying principle of experiential learning is holism; it allows us to recognize the humanity in ourselves and others as what connects us all.

### *University Education’s Bad Report Card*

We are taught that academic knowledge conveys power and opportunity, but how often do we escape the confines of campus to learn with and from those who are excluded from higher education? Our social work campus was recently moved “downtown,” a transition intended to bring us closer to the communities with whom we would be working. While this initially seemed like a good idea, there was little communication between the school and the larger community, and we learned that community members felt unwelcome in the building. Creating and maintaining a larger, cohesive community goes far beyond physical location and superficial gestures to incorporate people who are typically excluded.

Being a university student is an isolating experience, divorced from the larger community within a world of theory and competition among peers. The university environment in fact reflects the kind of emotional poverty that modern society perpetuates. The mad drive to *achieve* and be *better* divides the whole individual into separate parts (intellectual, emotional, physical, and spiritual) and divides us from one another. Masters of Social Work programs are designed to prepare individuals for the varied forms of social work practice, which include direct practice (working with individuals, families, and groups) and indirect practice (working with communities, social planning, administration, and research). Yet in the emphasis on

professionalism, the human connection is discouraged. In the Faculty of Social Work, I often hear, “Relationship heals.” Can a relationship built on professionalism’s strict boundaries and limited self-disclosure truly heal? It is difficult to form real relationships without allowing oneself to be vulnerable. Especially in the classroom, appearing exposed violates the understanding of academic etiquette. For me, university has been a place of facts and inquiry, not emotion. How can anyone in a helping profession expect those we attempt to help to be vulnerable to heal, without being willing to do so ourselves?

The things we talk about and disclose in Inside-Out are exactly the things we try to hide in the Faculty of Social Work. We want to be seen as living on an even keel, able to deal with anything our clients throw at us; we attempt to be robots. These hidden things comprise who we are but we are socialized to be ashamed of them. By contrast, the practice of “whole-self learning” accepts emotion as part of human existence. In this class, we took individual chances that allowed for the possibility of being *wrong*, exposing emotion, and being the flawed people that we all are without fear of judgment. We were all accepted for who we are and our own individual learning paths.

The Seven Grandfather Teachings played an extremely important role in welcoming this vulnerability. I was able to admit my academic struggles to my classmates because we *respected* one another’s learning and how that individually occurred; and because we recognized that *love* is needed most when people are weak, *bravery* requires us to face the foe (our own demons) with integrity, *honesty* with ourselves and others means admitting how we truly feel, *humility* is knowing that we are all equal and no one is better, *wisdom* is to be used for the good of the people, and *truth* is to know and recognize all of these things.

Ironically, the emotional, spiritual, and physical parts of ourselves that we ignore within the confines of university are the elements that most make us human and allow for connection with others as real people. Like trees, people grow in many directions; the roots grow down, the trunk up and the branches out. Experiencing and honoring all the parts of ourselves in an environment that includes self-reflection and introspection allows a stronger connection to who we are as individuals and practitioners. This is the kind of reflexivity, rare in university classrooms, that should be experienced in all helping profession training programs.

One of my inside classmates started in her Closing Ceremony address, “This world isn’t an easy place for any of us.” Without quantifying the difficulty of my classmates’ individual experiences, we shared a collective factor that continually brought us all together: we have each been confined. Some have been and are limited in the physical sense of the word, but all of us find ourselves intellectually restricted. As university students, we have all been told that we do not know what we know from experience because it has not been tested, proven, or published by someone else with more knowledge and power. Although I value the accumulated knowledge passed down through centuries of formalized education, disciplinary knowledge does not represent the whole picture. The lifetimes of experience and knowledge that we carry with us signify multiple and much needed ways of knowing. Each student in our class was able to engage, connect, teach, and learn the topics of diversity, marginalization, and oppression because we have all lived and therefore have personal knowledge to draw upon.

Throughout elementary and secondary school years, my report cards had a section called “learning skills.” In this section, the teacher rated how I was progressing in areas such as initiative, teamwork, problem solving, and cooperation with others. Once a student reaches university, there is no further commitment to developing these personal attributes. Upon graduation, however, there are few careers in which individuals work in isolation. Situations that teach individuals how to work with others, be part of a team, live in a community, and collectively enact social change should be just as valued in higher education as they were in early years. Experiential learning opportunities such as Inside-Out present methods to continue developing in these areas.

Through Inside-Out, I learned what it means to listen, and now I believe that hearing and listening are the most important skills I will bring to my social work practice. In one of my clinical classes, we studied active listening and interviewing skills and then demonstrated them through a video-taped mock clinical interview. Knowing that a large portion of my grade in the class would be determined by the interview, I was paralyzed with anxiety. I stumbled and stammered, trying to quickly recall techniques that would give my interviewee and viewer the impression I knew what on earth I was doing. Caught up in my personal presentation, I failed to really hear what my interviewee was saying. Afterwards, I felt dissatisfied with my ability to utilize essential social work techniques and suffered through the countless hours of transcribing my failure, writing off my ability to be an effective listener. Being part of the Inside-Out circle taught me otherwise: listening to actually hear is much more natural than trying to tick off a mental checklist of what one should be doing or saying. The circle carried the weight I previously felt I had to carry on my own. The constant question on my mind was, “Why doesn’t everyone in the faculty get this opportunity to explore why and who they are in such a safe space?”

A necessary component of our group’s success stemmed from the extensive classroom guidelines we collectively developed (see Appendix). In some other formal classes, guidelines were developed at the start of the term, but were soon forgotten. Here, the process of creating and revisiting our norms helped to reduce anxiety and create consistency. The concept of community learning is foreign to many students, so a tangible code helped set the community norms and shaped the space in this unconventional classroom. We started in small groups brainstorming answers to questions such as “How will we handle disagreement?” or “What about this class makes me feel uncomfortable?” These questions enabled us to address initial discomfort and create a space that was as safe as possible. Once crafted, the guidelines directed our interactions, from determining how contentious issues would be handled, to holding no assumptions, to knowing that within the class we are all physically safe. They acted as a unifying tool, maximizing learning while decreasing discomfort stemming from the unknown. Revisiting and referring to the guidelines often keeps them alive, ensuring fidelity or the opportunity for revision if something is inadequate or has unknowingly been omitted.

A crucial part of being in a helping profession is *unlearning* how to help in the traditional sense of the word. We are trained with tactics and techniques that are meant to facilitate others in helping themselves to improve their lives. This impulse can become so ingrained that we cannot distinguish when we are helping and when

we are not; it becomes difficult to refrain from trying to help someone who wants not to be helped, but simply to be heard. There were many instances in my Inside-Out course when a classmate was talking and I wanted to ask questions or comment before my classmate had finished speaking. My urge to contribute during another’s time was intended as an act of helping, to encourage further thought or insight, but the class code required that everyone had a chance to speak without interjection for as long as they needed. Every week, listening became easier and I was increasingly able to hear what my classmates were saying without a whirlwind of my own thoughts distracting me from their words. The code of entitled, uninterrupted time to speak for everyone should extend beyond the classroom circle; recognizing that individuals, friends, family, and the people we work with do not always want or need our help empowers the people in our personal and professional lives. I believe it is an important step in moving away from the client mentality and deprofessionalizing the helping fields.

### *Community Learning and the Whole Student*

I find it astounding how much emphasis academia places on what can be accomplished alone. What might be accomplished if more emphasis was placed on collaboration and collective success, rather than individual achievement? The concept of community learning, which the Inside-Out model adopts, has helped me to reconsider the relationship between learning and teaching. In our Inside-Out circle, we were all teachers and learners. Each individual had the responsibility to be accountable for their own learning and the learning of our classmates. As such, a class norm was to come to class prepared. Being prepared in this context does not just mean having completed the weekly readings, but to have thought about those readings, deconstructed them, made connections between the material and our own lives and experience, and looked for personal relevance within the texts. We were not relying upon what our professor believed to be true, attempting to memorize what she said in order to regurgitate it in an assignment later. The majority of the class content came from the students. If all 17 of us did not come to class with something to discuss or a question to pose, we would have spent three awkward hours in pin-drop silence.

Drawing on my lifetime of experience helped me reclaim my education and shape it to best meet my own needs, a basic premise of adult education that is rarely exercised. Learning about systems that keep people marginalized and oppressed helped me to recognize how those systems operate in my own life. This recognition of systems—including the University—led me to understand the concepts of oppression and marginalization in a very real way, empowering me to push against the marginalization and oppression I witness and experience in daily life.

Embracing learning with my whole self opened my heart and mind, allowing me to challenge traditionally accepted beliefs and preconceived notions about who is a “criminal” and who is a “student.” At our first class we all shared the fear of being judged by others; honest, genuine relationships and community learning squelched that fear. I have found liberation from the confines of the classroom by being heard, fair, accepted, and embraced within the Inside-Out circle.

Friendly challenge and engagement in productive, critical debate with classmates is actually *encouraged* when no one is attacked or silenced. Due to the competitive nature of the lecture format, the pressure to make oneself stand out as an intelligent individual often comes at the expense of the emotional safety of others. Before Inside-Out, I rarely admitted that I did not understand something. I was never "called out" on this, which was a great injustice to my own learning. One of the main strengths in a social work program is, I believe, the educational benefits gained from being part of a collective and developing from our shared knowledge and experiences. Experiential learning serves to unite a group rather than pitting individuals against each other. This allows students to place a higher degree of emphasis on the emotional, physical, intellectual, and spiritual learning of everyone. It helps one excel, not only academically, but also personally.

Embracing learning with my whole self has been novel and liberating. I am sorry for those who spend their entire university experience within the parameters of a campus. The most salient learning and growth I have experienced was fostered outside of the classroom, in experiential situations, from people who don't necessarily have a degree but who certainly have a great deal of humanity. Hearing multiple voices and perspectives within and beyond the context of education brings refreshing and urgently needed perspective to difficult issues. Ultimately, individuals whom we try to help are experts on their own lives. This should be recognized at the forefront of every therapeutic relationship.

Connecting the Inside-Out class content with my life experiences allowed me to learn with all aspects of my being. I tapped into multiple ways of knowing as each concept was animated through a connection I made to my life. When I used moments of my life as examples to understand concepts, I did not just learn the concept but *knew* it with my physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual self. At the beginning of the course, our class examined a section of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, discussing particularly the idea that oppressors can also be oppressed, and vice versa. The concept resonated with my own life and professional practice. I began to think back to instances where I moved between being both the oppressor and the oppressed. This reflection heightened my ability to recognize when I occupy the oppressor role, through my physical and emotional reactions to interactions. Shortly after, I was attempting to help a youth in the context of my workplace but the therapeutic relationship was becoming strained. I noted that I was experiencing actions similar to previous instances where I identified myself as the oppressor. Being cognizant of this helped me to minimize it in further interactions, which ultimately saved the relationship we had worked to establish. The personal work of relating concepts to my own experiences resulted in an ownership and passion for the content; I did not simply study it, but lived it.

## Conclusion

The conclusion of our class marked the first Inside-Out course to be completed in Canada and evolved into the first Women and Trans-people Inside-Out Collective existence. The collective continues to meet biweekly, focusing on projects of relevance both inside and outside the institution walls.

Whenever I discussed my participation in the Inside-Out Program with others outside of the faculty of social work, I was often met with the response, "Oh, that must be so good for *them*." This comment made my blood boil, as if offering this transformative educational opportunity was an act of charity meant solely to benefit *them*. The assumption that inside students would gain significantly more than outside students was false. I can easily say that participating in an experiential opportunity where I was not a helper but an equal has benefitted my social work practice more than I could have anticipated. Learning to help is the foundation of social work education, but unlearning to help is equally essential. Inside-Out provided a way to think about empowering others that, as Parker Palmer proposes, entails "no fixing, no saving, no advising, no setting each other straight," which came to embody what experiential learning and social work practice mean to me.<sup>2</sup>

Education should evoke feelings of intellectual freedom. At the beginning of class one evening, an outside classmate stated, "I am so happy to be back here; I feel free and liberated in here." We all laughed at the irony of her remark, but simultaneously recognized the truth in it: How many places of learning inspire a statement like that, especially in a locked and guarded classroom? If this is possible in an institution where people are placed in cages, imagine the potential elsewhere.

## Notes

1. "Glimpse Experiential Learning." Accessed August 13, 2012, [http://www.myglimpse-world.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=37](http://www.myglimpse-world.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=47&Itemid=37)
2. Parker Palmer. *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 115.

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