

## VOICES FROM INSIDE THE CIRCLE: THE WALLS TO BRIDGES COLLABORATIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING EXPERIENCE IN CANADA

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### Abstract

This paper offers a qualitative review of the authors' experience co-teaching their first Walls to Bridges (W2B) course in Ontario, Canada. W2B is an educational program where postsecondary courses are taught inside correctional facilities; the student cohort consists of equal numbers of 'inside' students (prisoners) and 'outside' university students. The authors use inside and outside student journals as qualitative data to provide compelling testimonials of the benefits of this innovative educational initiative and to showcase the students' voices. This article describes the importance of mobilizing Indigenous circle pedagogy to structure the course, which is exceptionally important in the Canadian context; the significance of recognizing the diverse voices in the circle; and the role of empathic listening and expressive speech to facilitating critical circle dialogue. We begin by outlining some of the main institutional barriers that need to be overcome to successfully run a W2B course and conclude with a review of some of the main benefits of this program for students and correctional staff alike – including, combatting inmate and staff stereotypes/codes, strengthening staff-prisoner relationships, increasing the inmate's social and cultural capital by way of university level education, and building bridges between the prison and the community by way of institutional partnerships between the university and corrections and inside and outside student connection.

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COLLABORATIVE  
CANADA**Introduction: What is Walls to Bridges?**

Walls to Bridges (W2B) is a unique Canadian offshoot of the American Inside-Out prison exchange program that was developed by Lori Pompa at Temple University in the late 1990s. Like Inside-Out, W2B courses are university or college classes that are held inside a correctional facility and whose student cohort consists of an equal mixture of incarcerated students and university-based students. The two programs are similar in their approach, where "the pedagogical foundation is collaborative learning in which all students are equal carriers of knowledge", the instructor functions as "both a learner and a teacher" and the group "share[s] in collaborative and exploratory dialogue about the course content" (Pollack, 2016a, p. 504; Pompa, 2013). Despite these similarities, there are some key differences between the two programs that flow from each country's distinct "national, cultural and criminal justice contexts", such as Canada's endemic overrepresentation of Indigenous peoples in carceral spaces of confinement (Pollack, 2016a, p. 504). In response to this racialized problematic,

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. (Pollack, 2016a, p. 504)

To become certified as a W2B facilitator, instructors must attend a week-long intensive training program that is run in the Grand Valley Institution for Women in Kitchener, Ontario by Wilfrid Laurier University Social Work Professor, Shoshana Pollack. In this training, instructors learn by way of both readings and practice what it means to engage with Indigenous inspired circle pedagogy, which moves away from the traditional banking system of unidirectional knowledge deposits from professor to student that is the hallmark of western post-secondary education (Freire, 1997). The novelty of circle pedagogy is not just that the group sits in a circle, which is a common format of correctional programming efforts, rather than in rows with the professor at the head of the class. Instead, it involves creating a more trusting and open relationship with participants that aims to reduce the power imbalance and hierarchy between teacher and student; it also works on the premise that circle participants are not there to critique, correct, influence, confront, or try to fix things for one another (Graveline, 1998; Palmer, 2004), which is quite different from correctional programming that directly challenges and aims to change prisoners' cognitive and behavioural patterns (Pollack & Kendall, 2005). This is achieved by attentive and receptive listening; in other words, not rushing to respond to a comment made by a circle participant and by speaking one's own truth rather than trying affirm or negate someone else's comments, which promotes "empathic appreciation of points of view other than [our] own" (Graveline, 1998, p. 186). In this way, the circle approach aims to challenge the "instrumentalism" of everyday speech by speaking "expressively".

When we speak expressively, we speak to express the truth within us, honoring the inner teacher by letting it know we are attending to its voice...when we speak to the center of the circle – free of the need to achieve a result – we feel energized and at peace. Now we speak with no other motivation than to tell the truth, and the self-affirming feelings that accompany such speech reinforce the practice. (Palmer, 2004, p. 119).

Circles engage the Indigenous principle of using a sacred object as 'talking stick' to moderate who

has the floor to speak. We adopted this principle, although given the security focused environment of the correctional setting we used a Nerf football to this end, which provided a fun method of passing the floor onto the next participant who wanted to speak. The key principles of this approach are to learn with one's whole self (meaning one's mind, body and spirit), working to learn across and from our differences, disrupting the privilege and power dynamics and hierarchies that are present in most classrooms and certainly in correctional environments, and of course – to invoke collaborative ways of teaching and learning (Graveline, 1998; Palmer, 2004).

Before a W2B course can be run inside a correctional facility, a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between corrections and the university must be signed; we were lucky that two other Ontario universities had run W2B courses, which set a precedent and provided a template for the MOU that the Ontario Ministry of Community Safety and Correctional Services and University of Ottawa would eventually sign. The authors ran the pilot W2B class in an Ontario detention and remand centre in January 2018. This article documents the exceptionally positive outcome of this collaborative teaching and learning experience and describes some the key benefits – for students and correctional staff – that emerge from empathically listening to different voices. We begin by outlining some of the main institutional barriers that instructors must circumvent in order to run a successful course. Our discussion of these barriers is not intended as a negative critique of operating correctional environments, but rather to inform readers of some of the barriers that need to be overcome in order to work collaboratively with outside partners, in this case, universities and colleges aiming to offer credited post-secondary courses to prisoners.

#### **Institutional Obstacles to Overcome**

It was quite clear throughout our negotiations with the correctional institution and university that the notion of risk was at the forefront of everyone's mind. Would there be risks – physical or mental – to the safety of the professors and outside students? Would our presence in the institution create interpersonal problems amongst prisoners or between prisoners and staff that could threaten the safety and security of the institution? Who would be responsible if these hypothetical dangers emerged? And if they did, how would this affect the reputation of both the institution and the university, let alone the W2B program itself? The authors met with institutional representatives regularly over a two-year period to answer these questions, although the fear of potential risks was never long from thought even as the course began. In the first week we held separate meetings with the inside and outside students, who were also given a security lecture and tour of the facility by senior correctional staff. While important, these efforts strongly emphasized the potential dangerousness of the environment and the population that would come to make up half of our student cohort. Despite spending years studying criminology (outside students were all in their fourth year and last semester of their undergraduate program), the security lecture and carceral tour raised concerns amongst the outside students about the individuals who would become their classmates, thus reifying the cleavage between students rather than promoting the connectedness that W2B and circle pedagogy rely upon and promote.

This experience was not unexpected, however, given that research on carceral tours, also described as "dark tourism", details how this enterprise is built upon the premise of providing an institutionally friendly view of incarceration that does little to reveal the ways in which the prison inflicts harm on incarcerated people or the racialized, classed and gendered inequities and structures that shore up

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mass incarceration (Piché & Walby, 2010). We mobilized this experience as a key point of discussion by way of course content and circle discussion, which allowed us to critically examine the value of carceral tours and how this practice, while often the only way for citizens to see inside a prison setting, can skew the public's perception of criminalized people and can problematically reinforce views of a need to invoke more punitive management strategies in carceral settings. These particular circle discussions, which occurred in the first few weeks of the semester, provided the professors and outside students with a view of carceral tours as they are experienced by incarcerated people as an invasion of privacy; the prison is, after all, their living space for the time being. The pedagogical result was what Graveline (1998) encourages, namely the ability to appreciate the views and experiences of others, especially those marked by difference by way of their own experiences, so as to permit empathy to flourish and a collective group connection to start to develop.

There are, however, significant challenges and barriers to attempting to learn and study inside a prison, including: the obvious physical barriers of a lack of access to computers, the Internet, classroom space, and the disruptive force of institutional lockdowns; the institutional barriers of a lack of human, fiscal, and material resources; the relational barriers of interpersonal conflict and power imbalances between students and between students and staff; and the psychological barriers of living in a high stress environment away from friends and family while trying to develop critical thinking skills and learning complex post-secondary course content (Fayter, 2016; Petey, 2016). We experienced three main institutional obstacles that we had to work to circumvent in order to ensure the success of our W2B course. First, there were a number of institutional constraints that were largely material in nature; for example, the lack of classroom space meant we could only run classes that were very small in size (12-16 students maximum); students did not have access to computers, the Internet, pens (they were only permitted golf size pencils), erasers, or books (we had to photocopy all material, which had to remain loose-leaf with no staple or clip). In an effort to level the playing field between inside and outside students, we required that the outside students also handwrite all of their assignments with a golf pencil, a practice that provided a unique and embodied learning opportunity that showcased in a very discernible way just how difficult it is to study and learn inside a correctional setting.

Second, we had to work to combat the discursive structures and rhetoric of both the inmate and staff cultures. We were conscious that by selecting a small group of prisoners to participate in the course we were ostensibly denying access to others which could have created conflict between individuals on the inside. We were also concerned that the inside students might be subject to ribbing or antagonisms by their fellow prisoners for participating in this initiative and that this might deter them from fully engaging in the course material and assignments. A scholastic identity hardly contributes to the image and reputation of toughness that research demonstrates is important for many incarcerated people to preserve in order to adapt to life inside (Crewe, 2009). The group discussed this point at length in circle and, thankfully, the inside students were not mocked for participating in the class. Rather, indicative of the transformative power of educational opportunities in prison that help prisoners overcome their common lack of social and cultural capital (Davis, 2016; Fayter, 2016; McAleese, 2016; Pompa, 2013), requests to join the class continued to pour in over the course of the semester as word spread about how much the inside students were learning and enjoying the class. Staff members were equally excited about the general prison population's growing interest in the initiative and in response requested that we offer two courses the following year to

help accommodate the increase in requests to participate, which we were glad to arrange with the university.

We had similar concerns about the staff culture and how some staff members might respond to our weekly presence in the institution and to the inside students selected to participate in the course. Would we witness staff communicating problematic stereotypes about incarcerated people? Would we be treated with suspicion or as security threats rather than educators and students? As anticipated, we received some snide commentary from correctional officers that reflected the principle of less eligibility, namely that incarcerated people are not deserving of this educational opportunity, given that post-secondary education is not equally accessible to all non-criminalized people. For example, a guard made a comment as we passed through security that she was still paying off her student loans yet the inside students were getting to take a university course for free. The professors used this as a teachable moment for the outside students by engaging in a conversation with the guard about the transformative benefits of offering educational opportunities in prison (Pompa, 2013), a fact that she conceded. We also pointed out that a university degree requires the successful completion of 40 courses so concerns about the inequitable fiscal expenditure were negligible, not to mention that the university saves money because it does not have the fiscal cost of using campus space for the class.

Finally, in order to successfully teach a university course inside a correctional facility it is important to know and understand the rules of engagement – namely, the rules of interaction between staff and prisoners that flow from the above-mentioned inmate and staff cultures as well as institutional policy. The initial security lecture given by a Superintendent at the facility helped the outside students and professors learn about some of the key institutional policies and protocols, which prepared them regarding appropriate attire, accepted and banned items, communication protocols, security requirements, safety concerns, and general 'do's and don'ts'. However, it is important to recognize that staff members wield what Crewe (2011, p. 456) describes as hard power (occurs by way direct commands and coercion) and soft power (occurs through psychological means, via self-interest and self-regulation), which structure and shape staff-prisoner relationships.

Whereas the welfarist dimensions of soft power encourage closer relationships between prisoners and staff, its neo-liberal policies hinder them. First, they reduce the need for staff to engage with prisoners in the pursuit of order. With such a battery of tools available to make prisoners comply, strong relationships – 'knowing your prisoners' – take a backseat to other means of ensuring compliance (Crewe, 2011, p. 463).

At the same time that prisoners commonly lack trust in authority figures, they depend on them while incarcerated to secure access to programs and institutional privileges (Crewe, 2009; 2011). The strain inherent in the staff-prisoner dynamic can be a distinct obstacle to overcome when teaching inside prison, which we learned in earnest when the Superintendent of Programming, who was our point person and 'champion' through the process of organizing the course and solidifying the MOU, took a leave of absence from work during the last few weeks of the semester. As Pollack and Hutchison (2018, p. 7) found in their evaluation of the impact of W2B classes on correctional facilities, having an internal staff person support and champion the program is "invaluable as they were often able to navigate complex institutional environments to reduce barriers and coordinate the logistics necessary

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to operate university-level courses in a correctional facility". Without our champion's presence in those final weeks we were repeatedly held up at security for the remaining classes, losing an hour or more of class time each week, and some of our course supplies mysteriously disappeared, which made it more difficult for the students to complete their final group projects.

There are clearly many physical, psychological, and interpersonal barriers or challenges to teaching and learning in a correctional environment. However, with care taken, education provides a win-win model for both the university and corrections, as well as for the facilitators and for all of the students that participate. Next, we describe what can be gained by prioritizing the recognition of different voices and valuing the diverse experiences that are shared in circle.

#### **The Collective Gains born from Empathic Listening and Expressive Speech**

Before the first class, students and facilitators alike were unsure about what to expect. Similar to Pollack's (2016b) findings, even if inside and outside students choose to participate in this course for different reasons, they share anxiety about being judged and misunderstood. The inside students were concerned about meeting "conservative and judgemental students" and being the object of academic scrutiny. As one student wrote in their reflexive journal:

It was a novelty. Having future criminologists in proximity and research-driven facilitators come with a gusto of heighten[ed] suspicion; and to be candid I signed up feeling like a test subject or lab rat to be examined by outside students. But prison proved to be a fit setting for understanding.

Outside students had their own insecurities; for example, some thought they would have to constantly look over their shoulders to ensure their safety and security. Both groups were afraid "it would be awkward and uncomfortable" and acknowledged self-doubt about their abilities to contribute to the class in a sufficiently meaningful way. Our teaching experience reflects Pollack's (2016b) finding that inside students are nervous about not being "academic enough" to meet the outside students' level of scholastic engagement. Similarly, outside students were nervous about being too academic and unsure about how to engage their feelings and personal experiences as sources of knowledge.

The objective of the course as we taught it was to understand and unpack the interpersonal and structural processes of 'Othering' in the criminal justice system. This required exploring and challenging our beliefs regarding systemic racism and sexism through circle pedagogy, which was a new experience for the two course facilitators, as it is for most W2B students (Pollack, 2016b).

To be honest; at first, I did not think much of it. I thought it was just a cool way to discuss [things] as a group. But as the weeks went by and people became more opened [sic] about their experiences, I realized how powerful this circle actually is. It is a place of trust; respect and security that brought us closer (student journal).

Quite quickly, the circle became a space to be human in an environment where that can feel challenging; it became a safe place to speak your own truth and a place where the group was able to learn with their whole selves. The structure and function of circle pedagogy effectively worked to reduce the possible traumatic aftermath of exploring difficult issues; for example, like those



pertaining to racism and sexism. Each participant contributed physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually to every issue we discussed and we all quickly realised that listening is just as important as speaking, sometimes more so. As one student wrote in their reflexive journal, "I went to this class feeling uncertain about having a voice that was worth being heard, what I found instead was it was not a voice I needed to find but a deeper ability to listen". Learning to listen, listening to learn, the goal of W2B courses is not to "fix" or "save" each other, nor is it to give advice (Graveline, 1998; Palmer, 2004); the goal is to learn together (Pollack, 2016a). To this end, we aimed to eliminate the traditional divide between teacher and student so as to form a classroom community, which we accomplished by means of experiential icebreaking activities.

As an extra precaution to ensure that students were coping well with sensitive classroom discussions, the professors maintained regular contact with the Director of Programs, communicating any concerns they had regarding how the students were processing course content. Inside students were frequently informed that they would be given immediate access to counselling or social work professionals should they desire the opportunity to speak with them and the outside students were encouraged to utilize the free campus psychological counselling services should they feel distressed. The professors also made themselves available to meet students outside their scheduled office hours and held individual meetings with the inside students throughout the semester to provide private opportunities to check in with them.

Despite their initial doubts, students grasped the meaning, pedagogy and philosophy of the course instinctively. Everyone was challenged by the course in one way or another, some by the level and content of the readings, some by the issues we discussed, some by the correctional environment itself, and some by the experiences shared by participants while in circle. Over the course of the semester, however, it became increasingly obvious how much we all had in common – despite our different upbringings, social locations and experiences. In class and in their weekly journal entries, students shared their personal life experiences and beliefs in ways that were relevant to the weekly course topics, commonly expressing their hope that the criminal justice system can improve and become more compassionate. Only when you listen to someone without trying to fix or advise them can you begin to learn from them (Graveline, 1998; Palmer, 2004; Pollack, 2016a) – this was the true gift of this class – the ability to learn from individual participants sharing their personal thoughts, fears and experiences. In the next section, we detail some of the main benefits of the W2B program for students and correctional facilities.

**"Humanity Tuesday's": Benefits of W2B for Students and Corrections**

The W2B teaching model significantly benefits those outside students who envision a career working in or in partnership with corrections by bringing them into the field for an innovative learning opportunity (Pollack, 2016a, 2016b). Spending a semester learning inside a correctional setting allows students to develop firsthand experiential and observational knowledge about what it means to live and work in a securitized environment where concerns about risk and safety are prioritized, at times to the detriment of the mental, emotional and physical wellbeing of incarcerated people (Crewe, 2009). As our students recounted in their journal entries:

Having people with experience and going through "othering" within the prison setting pushed my understanding of the injustices of the system to another level.

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As a criminologist, I had learned about these issues prior to taking W2B but no amount of reading, writing, documentary viewing or even guest speakers are as powerful as getting to know someone deeply and hearing their truth. This experience is felt deep within your heart and leaves a mark on your soul and spirit. The impact of these testimonies and sharing is not easily neglected or "shrugged off". Opening up and seeing someone else open up cannot be translated into written or spoken words but will remain with me far beyond any other course or reading I have experienced.

The impact of this course was far greater than we expected and the knowledge gleaned went beyond simply learning about the criminal justice system. This course brought inside and outside students together and united them as members of a collective community; not only did it challenge the outside students' perceptions of inside students, but it also helped the inside students to abandon stereotypes they held about outside students as privileged individuals "born with silver spoons in their mouths" (Pollack and Hutchison, 2018, p. 10). Instead of thinking of knowledge as a series of facts to memorize, W2B students learn by developing a greater ability to reflect on our shared sense of humanity. By learning through and across difference, students discover the many commonalities they share (Pollack, 2016b).

This program has had an inconceivable impact on my perception of not only the Canadian jail-prison system but in each of my relationships and my position toward other individuals in general.

Getting to develop real relationships within a group of people that I wouldn't usually meet, I learned a lot about common humanity.

Acknowledging one's humanity is so important in life and this was even more emphasized through this class.

One student referred to the class, which was held on Tuesday afternoons, as "Humanity Tuesday's". He stated that, for him, the course was not only about acknowledging the humanity of others, regardless their mistakes, it was also about accepting his own humanity despite his criminalization. As another student wrote in their journal:

It has been very helpful to me and I do believe the others as well. I got to see how as a prisoner other people perceive me as an individual... And all along I have been seeing a better understanding of how society sees me as an incarcerated person. Which will help me upon my release to break down potential walls with non-incarcerated people, such as my kids. This course has opened my eyes to a whole new understanding, meaning of life as a whole. It actually has given me hope to be accepted back into society as a normal person and no longer a number.

This student's testimony illustrates how education and interpersonal connection can promote the reflexive self-understanding that is required to engender the adoption of pro-social behaviour that the correctional system aims to foster by way of rehabilitative efforts. Education does not only help



develop critical thinking skills, it also provides incarcerated people with a chance to realize and value the skills they already possess – such as their compassion for others and their ability to learn from their experiences, including their mistakes.

Educational opportunities for incarcerated people have also been found to encourage dynamic security and to significantly reduce recidivism rates (Pollack 2016a, 2016b; Pollack & Hutchison, 2018; Pompa, 2013). To this end, the inside students expressed that the mere fact of being chosen to take the class was a strong incentive for them to be on their best behaviour because they did not want to do anything to risk their ability to participate or to jeopardize this specific course or the existence of the program at the detention centre. Similarly, staff members report that W2B makes correctional populations easier to manage and improves staff-prisoner relationships, which contributes to the production of a safer, more humane, and less stressful prison environment for all who live and work there (Pollack 2016a, 2016b; Pollack & Hutchison, 2018; Pompa, 2013). It should come as no surprise that staff members prefer dealing with prisoners who are motivated by pro-social opportunities that build self-esteem and a sense of humanity and community belonging rather than the inmate code (Crewe, 2009).

We argue that these benefits can be especially profound when the course engages with issues pertaining to criminalization and detention, as our course did. While some staff members might have reservations about a class that critically examines issues like solitary confinement, staff-prisoner relationships, or the unique needs of certain marginalized populations, such as transgender prisoners, these issues are important to the inside students who have relevant experiential knowledge to share that others can learn from. We discovered that having students reflect on hot button prison issues can positively impact prison culture. Learning to reflect upon and critically analyze the different intersecting processes of 'Othering' that take place between prisoners and between staff and prisoners creates opportunities to find common ground and develop mutual understanding, and disrupts the harmful stereotypes that are characteristic of prison culture. As Pollack and Hutchison (2018, p. 10) found, prison staff started to "reconstruct who they believe the 'inside' students to be, by seeing them as students, rather than only as 'inmates'."

By mobilizing an educational model that disrupts the dynamics and hierarchies inherent to traditional classroom settings and correctional institutions, Walls to Bridges courses aim to build bridges between the prison and community. The bridges built between inside and outside students, many of whom are future professionals in the field, contribute to shaping the views of each group – motivating the inside students to adopt pro-social behaviour and the outside students to engage the difficult interpersonal development work that strengthens staff-prisoner relationships and creates a safer more humane correctional environment. As Pollack and Hutchison (2018, p. 8) note, "the positive impact W2B classes had on the correctional 'host' facilities in fostering a culture of education" is an undeniable benefit for both the university and correctional communities.

Though this paper provides a descriptive account of student and professor experiences of one W2B course, future research should endeavour to determine other tangible benefits that are accrued from participating for both the inside and outside learners as well as the professors, correctional staff and overall correctional climate. The professors developed an extremely detailed course evaluation document (6 pages of questions) that they will continue to use in future courses in order to document

student experiences across classes, which will increase the sample size and further demonstrate the credibility of the results identified herein. They would also like to draft a survey for correctional staff to better ascertain how W2B benefits staff-prisoner relationships and inmate culture from a correctional perspective.

### Conclusion

The Walls to Bridges teaching and learning experience is exceptional in the Canadian post-secondary landscape and it has a number of benefits – for the university, for corrections, as well as for the facilitators and students. In the growing climate of academic austerity ushered in by provincial demands for greater bureaucratic oversight, streamlined learning objectives, and funding cuts in conjunction with university fears of declining enrollment rates that are some of the hallmarks of the 'corporate university' (Cheyfitz, 2009), Walls to Bridges stands apart as a *decidedly* unique pedagogical approach. As the university regularly pushes to increase our class sizes, threatening the important and formative fourth year small seminar style class structure, Walls to Bridges requires and depends on that configuration in order to function – both pedagogically and pragmatically in terms of the very limited size of available physical space within which to host such classes inside most penal institutions. By mobilizing circle pedagogy, W2B also contributes to the important reconciliation initiative of trying to 'Indigenize' university and college programs.

Policy-makers and administrators on both sides should take note that the W2B program is a win-win for both the prison and the university; fiscally there is a sharing of resources, and there are numerous benefits to the students (inside and outside students alike) and correctional staff, who report positive shifts in prisoner attitude and behaviour (Pollack & Hutchison, 2018). W2B courses require the university to cover the cost of tuition for the incarcerated students, but because the university does not have to foot the bill for classroom space or physical resources other than the photocopy cost of the course readings this cost is negligible. W2B courses also contribute to the production of a stronger relationship between the prison and the community and is a unique way for the university to build institutional partnerships and to invest in a particularly marginalized segment of the population, which can bolster the public image of both the university and prison.

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