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# Teaching Introduction to Walls to Bridges in a Canadian Prison: A Flipped Classroom Approach to Making Access and Inclusion Matter

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the process of facilitating a unique course offered in a Canadian prison using the Walls-to-Bridges (W2B) approach. Similar to the Inside-Out Program in the United States, W2B in Canada brings campus-enrolled students together with incarcerated students inside the prison walls to study university courses for credit. In this paper, I reflect on a unique first-year level class I offered in Winnipeg, Treaty 1 territory, at Stony Mountain Penitentiary, called Introduction to Walls to Bridges. I emphasize the flipped and open-ended nature of this Introduction to Walls to Bridges class and the dynamic features of the W2B exercises used. The paper contributes to literatures on access to education and inclusive pedagogy by arguing that prison education programs should adopt the flipped classroom and ungrading as core principles to improve access and inclusion in prison education.

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## Introduction

The literature on access to education and inclusive pedagogy has highlighted the transformative nature of prison education (Gould, 2018; Leon et al., 2024; Philippon et al., 2024; Stein, 2024), however there has been little academic focus on Walls to Bridges (W2B) specifically. Walls to Bridges in Canada brings campus-enrolled students together with incarcerated students to study university and college courses for credit inside prison. Walls to Bridges is similar to The Inside-Out Program in the United States (Philippon et al., 2024) and the Learning Together Model in the United Kingdom. This paper analyzes my experiences of planning, arranging, and facilitating a course offered in a Canadian prison using the W2B approach to prison education. Contributing to literature on access and inclusion in education (see Behan, 2007; Bergmann & Sams, 2012), in this paper I explore the pedagogical approach of a class I offered in Winnipeg, Treaty 1 territory, called Introduction to Walls to Bridges. This course was organized at Stony Mountain Penitentiary, near Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada. Stony Mountain is often referred to as The Canadian Rock or Canadian Alcatraz.

A typical W2B class is an upper-level university course with regular content that is taught in the Walls to Bridges style using W2B exercises. With this new Introduction to Walls to Bridges class at the first-year level I took steps to flip the classroom as much as possible and to reduce the amount of substantive content (slides, lectures), for reasons that pertain to access to education, inclusion, and experiential learning. As Hopkins (2015, p. 53) argues, providing structure for students in prison education is important, but providing opportunities for agency and empowerment is crucial as well. In this paper, I argue flipped classrooms and ungrading can help provide opportunities for agency and empowerment in prison education. I incorporated aspects of flipped classrooms and ungrading (Rapchak et al., 2023; Shah, 2024), which are important for educators to consider when attempting to enhance active learning and access to education in the post-secondary sector. Flipped classrooms provide students more control over course design, course exercises, and what the assignments will be. Flipped classrooms also dedicate more course time to working through course material together (Li et al., 2023; O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015). Ungrading is an approach that emphasizes grading for growth or grading in ways that are encouraging rather than punitive (Rapchak et al., 2023; Stommel, 2024). Li et al. (2023) have argued that the practice of flipped classes tends to be somewhat directionless, requiring grounding in an additional educational mission. In this paper, I argue connecting the practices of flipped classes and ungrading to the W2B (and Inside-Out) philosophy gives flipped classes and ungrading a much needed direction. It follows that the experiential dimension of prison education should be the dynamic exercises, not simply the fact that the class happens in a prison. In my experience, there too much focus in prison education practice on the location of instruction, which does not prompt any change to the pedagogical approach of the instructor. By being more explicit about flipped classes and ungrading in prison education, prison educators can enhance access and inclusion in the classroom.

Prison educators must not neglect that it is the dynamic nature of W2B exercises that makes prison education a special case of access to education and inclusive pedagogy. In this paper, I argue it is the dynamic nature of W2B exercises that provides the experiential component, and not simply the fact that the class is occurring in a different (carceral) space. Access and inclusion can be enhanced by focusing on these dynamic exercises, flipped classrooms, and ungrading. Indeed, I suggest access and inclusion will be limited unless the flipped classroom and ungrading are core principles that prison education programmes adopt. This paper will be relevant to any scholar interested in access to education and inclusive pedagogy. In the first section, I review relevant literature on prison education, situating the W2B in relation to some of the tensions that characterize prison education in North America. In the second section, I provide an analysis of this Introduction to Walls to Bridges class approach. Inside-Out instructors in the United States will hopefully benefit from connecting this explanation of W2B exercises to their own practice of prison education.

## **Literature on prison education and inclusive pedagogy**

As literature on prison education notes, bringing together incarcerated and university-enrolled students to take courses inside the prison walls turns students

inside out or transforms them (Fouché & Guillermo, 2022; Maclaren, 2015). Inside and outside students (and facilitators) report that these courses transform them through creating dialogues that rarely happen in typical university classrooms. For outside students, the goal is to challenge assumptions about education (and prisoners), creating unique learning opportunities. For inside students, the goals include creating education opportunities (for credit), acquiring communication skills, and generating hope, which can act as a bridge to community integration. Taking the course for credit creates a connection to the outside community that can aid in access to education once released (Fayter, 2016; Pollack, 2016a). Most people in prison and jail will be released and it is argued that prison education helps with release and reintegration (Maher, 2015).

The chances of following a path to education and community connections are enhanced as more incarcerated persons are granted access to education (Coker et al., 2017). Access to education for criminalized persons is thus described as a key aspect of access to justice (Farley & Hopkins, 2017; Stein, 2024), since criminalized people have often been previously banned or forced out of educational institutions and may have experienced significant interruptions in their attempts to gain an education. This means that access and inclusion in prison education need to be more than just lip service or rhetorical, otherwise our incarcerated students may feel alienated or pushed out of education again.

Many of the professors who established Walls to Bridges in Canada (Shoshana Pollack and Simone Weil Davis in Ontario, and Judith Harris in Manitoba) received Inside-Out training prior to 2011. W2B began in Canada in 2011 as a pilot partnership between the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University and Grand Valley Institution (prison for women). An inside and an outside collective of W2B students formed. This site then became the home to the Canadian Instructor Training Program for W2B in Canada. Subsequently, W2B chapters or collectives have been established at universities in other Canadian provinces. W2B Canada is now organized out of the McMaster Indigenous Research Institute at McMaster University, led by Dr. Savage Bear. In any given semester, there are 5–7 W2B classes running at prisons across Canada, all organized by local W2B chapters or collectives. The main difference between Inside-Out and W2B is that in W2B there is more of an explicit focus on the Canadian criminal justice system, notably the systemic racism and dispossession that Indigenous people have faced from police and prisons. The W2B program in Canada does not accept guards in the room during classes, however education staff can be present. Often the education staff are in and out of the classroom, sometimes participating in the class. At Stony Mountain, the education staff have all participated in W2B training and understand what W2B is about (cf. Bucher & Tseng, 2023). The overlap and differences between the W2B approach and the Inside-Out approach to prison education should be the focus of further inquiry.

W2B courses must undo barriers in the classroom and foster inclusion using techniques such as the circle in which inside and outside students are interspersed throughout and all faces are turned toward one another (Pollack, 2016a, 2016b). This approach is meant to foster trust and belonging so that people feel comfortable learning with their whole selves, and in this sense W2B techniques are inclusive. Working in a circle invites students to address privilege and stereotypes (Palmer, 2017)

while hearing and recognizing the voices of each another (Pollack & Eldridge, 2015). When dialogue happens, “students from opposite sides of prison walls learn to recognize the humanity of the previously unknown ‘other’” (Inderbitzin, 2015, p. 48). Everyone in the circle is encouraged to find their inner teacher and share their knowledge (Pollack, 2014). Learning in a circle and treating each member as equal enables a form of communication that rarely occurs in typical university classrooms on regular campuses. This approach to learning allows students access to the stories of their peers in a way that fosters experiential learning and a greater depth and breadth of learning (Zhai, 2017). This type of learning is meant to be more effective and memorable than armchair, lecture-based learning, which often fails to resonate with many students, especially first-generation university students.

A W2B class is noisy with healthy discussion, laughter, and sometimes weeping that can stem from sharing stories. We use interactive and participatory exercises such as wagon wheels (see below) and others to help students express their stories, and we try to connect these stories to the readings through different forms of collective reflection and exposition (Pollack, 2014). We use exercises like tableaux (a group freeze frame expressing an idea), allowing students to learn with their whole selves. However, we always return to the big circle to assess and debrief together as a group. The circle provides a supportive space to do the work of being vulnerable which can lead to a transformation of the self and motivate future struggles for justice. The W2B approach borrows from the Quaker tradition of meeting in a circle, sitting with silence, and learning from ambivalence. This approach also borrows from Indigenous practices of circle work and sharing circles. W2B is not the only program in Canada adopting this approach. For example, the Wahkohtowin program in Saskatoon has been drawing from Indigenous knowledges and doing similar work, meeting people where they are at and providing access to education for years (see Buhler et al., 2019).

As a facilitator who has taught 10 classes with imprisoned students, I am not naïve to the fact that the administration of corrections agencies are happy to have outside groups provide education for free when prisons and jails have a legal mandate to provide it. Inspired by McDowell and Reed’s (2018) criticism of the contradictions of prisoner education, I have always tried to maintain a reflexive and critical view of the prison in which this course was organized. McDowell and Reed’s (2018) criticism of the contradictions of prisoner education programs is well-taken (also see Leon et al., 2024). Education ends up being a privilege instead of something all incarcerated people have access to. Prisons and jails use education as another carrot in the carceral mill. Prisoners who do not display proper institutional behaviour are cut off from access to education (also see Leon et al., 2024; Farley & Hopkins, 2017). Outside students sometimes have a voyeuristic outlook that can be difficult to detect during screening/interviewing, raising ethical questions about experiential leaning in prisons (Meisel, 2008). McDowell and Reed (2018) call on prison educators to resist the service-learning model and instead take a more critical approach by listening to what prisoners say about education and the contradictions of organizing prison education in carceral settings.

My response to this critique has been to change my approach to prison education, by focusing more on flipped classrooms and ungrading to improve access and

inclusion. There is no point in replacing one structure (the prison regime) with another (the conventional approach to university education), as this is likely to alienate students who have been denied access to education in the past as criminalized students typically have. While no prison education collective can resolve the overarching tensions caused by penal power, as an instructor I can ensure I am taking pedagogical steps to make access and inclusion matter in the W2B classroom. This is why I argue that emphasis on flipped classes and ungrading in prison education can ensure that prison education does not turn into a form of voyeurism. The flipped classroom, whether used for the whole course or a few selected class sessions, makes more time for students working through ideas together in a collaborative way (O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015). Ungrading allows educators to address "structural inequities of education" (Stommel, 2024, p. 329) by evaluating students based on the growth and dedication. These practices can help students have time to work through ideas, enhance communication, and deepen a sense of community (Gorichanaz, 2024). For these reasons, I argue using flipped classes and ungrading can provide substance and direction to the ideas of access and inclusion in prison education everywhere.

## Method

This paper is based on notes made during and after the course that I facilitated in the prison. I was making the notes to have a record of what happened so I could use these to inform the next iteration of the course. To this end, I am engaging in autoethnography. Autoethnography values actual personal experience and its meanings, and is empathetic and ethically aware in ways that other forms of social science such as surveys may not always be (Ellis, 1999; Trahar, 2009). I engage with autoethnography to see what analytic value can be scraped from my own experience and observation of the classroom space (Atkinson, 2006). As Bordt and Carceral (2012) note, there is value for future instructors in revisiting the details of a new class offered inside. Examining the exercises that I used helps me to reflexively assess what could be changed so that I can improve as a W2B facilitator and trainer and hopefully help other instructors develop their craft as prison educators.

Autoethnography is an appropriate method for this paper since I am explaining my approach to designing this class and the exercises used, offering a rationale for the flipped classroom and ungrading elements that I incorporated. Reflection on this class also helps me to clarify my approach to education and activism (Hamlin, 2016). I have tried to write this paper in an accessible manner so that any educator in any discipline or setting could pick it up and hopefully gain something out of it for their own work. I have kept in contact with many outside students and most of the inside students from this and other W2B classes I have facilitated, and I continue to work on various projects with them. It is inspiring to see the changes in their lives and in the world they are making. I have run the ideas for this paper by them as a form of member checking (McKim, 2023) as well.

This account below represents my experience and my views only, which is a limit of autoethnography. I am reporting on the design of one class at one penal institution, and other instructors may face different conditions or restraints elsewhere, meaning the transferability of these findings could be considered low. However, the

argument that flipped classrooms and ungrading should be core principles in prison education and that the experiential dimension of prison education should be the dynamic exercises is one that should resonate with W2B and Inside-Out prison educators everywhere.

## **Introduction to Walls to Bridges: Experiential, accessible, and dynamic**

This course and all my experience with W2B prison education has occurred at Stony Mountain Penitentiary near Winnipeg, Manitoba, in Treaty One Territory. Housing over 800 prisoners, Stony Mountain is a federal prison operated by Correctional Service Canada (CSC). Stony Mountain is organized into maximum, medium, and minimum-security units. All prisoners are serving two years or more on their sentences. What is different about Stony Mountain compared to most Canadian prisons is that during any given month more than 80% of the people imprisoned at Stony Mountain are Indigenous which in Canada means they identify as First Nations, Métis, or Inuit, all unique Indigenous communities in Canada. This is one reason why in W2B there is more of an explicit focus on systemic racism that Indigenous people have faced in Canada. This is reflected in the readings we use in W2B as well as the activities.

This idea for the Introduction to Walls to Bridges class emerged from a practical need. I had already offered nearly every class I had ever taught W2B style in medium security at Stony Mountain, including a few reading courses. The inside students were eager for another course, and it had to be one that they had not already taken for credit. Once one begins teaching W2B they feel a sense of obligation to keep offering courses. Our contact in the Education Department at Stony was keen to facilitate any option we could prepare and deliver, so it was decided that we would try something called Introduction to Walls to Bridges.

At the University of Winnipeg, the Registrar is supportive of W2B. The Registrar oversees a stream of courses called Multidisciplinary, which exists to foster course development and access to education. After discussing our options with the Education Department at Stony Mountain and the Registrar, we decided to create something called Introduction to Walls to Bridges. The idea for this Introduction to Walls to Bridges course was to create a class focusing on the W2B approach to learning. This became the platform to deepen my use of flipped classrooms and ungrading techniques in my prison education practice. To begin, I selected readings on the history of prison education, Inside-Out, and Walls to Bridges, readings on access to education and inclusive pedagogy, and readings on the outcomes of these approaches to prison education. Beyond that, the framework for the course was open and shifted over time. I let the students finalize a lot of the assignment rubrics.

The classroom at Stony is just big enough for 20 chairs placed in a circle. This could be perceived as a challenge in offering a W2B class or any other kind of dynamic flipped class. In W2B, especially when one is operating with a flipped classroom approach, it sometimes suddenly makes sense to split into small groups and work at the flip charts. We sometimes suddenly move back to the big circle and do a group debrief of something that happened in the class. Sometimes suddenly we move into a creative exercise that requires a lot of movement.

W2B education is often referred to as experiential learning (Maclaren, 2015). The assumption among many at the university is that the outside students gain the experience of learning simply by being present in the prison. It is not that simple. Experiential learning in W2B happens through dynamic interactions that are fostered in the W2B exercises. This reflects the importance of W2B training with a focus on W2B activities. As I argue, experiential learning does not simply happen because of outside students being in a prison. If not conducted with the proper ethics, simply taking outside students to a prison for class could be unethical, voyeuristic, and hurtful to inside students and other people incarcerated there (Piché and Walby, 2010). This is why I argue that the experiential learning component of prison education must be grounded in the dynamic group exercises, the flipped classroom, and ungrading, rather than the carceral site itself, otherwise complicity in voyeurism could emerge.

For the inside students, the flipped nature of the class meant they were able to participate in a W2B university course without having to worry about memorizing all the content. Instead, they could focus on the exercises, and new ways of thinking about education and themselves. For the outside students, they were able to take a university course that was more flipped or student-driven than even a typical W2B class. This means there was less focus on content and the conventional tasks of a university class (memorization, tests). Instead, like the inside students, they could concentrate on the process. Both inside and outside students were able to learn from one another and teach each other about what education means to them. Rather than passive pawns in the education system and the prison system, they start to see themselves as peers, facilitators, and teachers.

The course began with a week of readings on Walls to Bridges education (Bear, 2000; Maclaren, 2015; Palmer, 2009; Sferrazza, 2018), during which we reflected on the role of critical pedagogy. For the first two weeks of the class, students were somewhat unsettled by the lack of fixed content for this course. The content was not predetermined. For example, there were readings on W2B and inclusive education and critical pedagogy. However, the readings were grouped into five sections or chunks rather than weeks. Most weeks we did address the readings using a W2B technique called a triad which involves small groups making collective notes on flipped charts around the room. The students did have to complete written assignments, however when these were due and what the rubric for these would be were determined as a result of group discussion in the circle.

In W2B, the exercises are open-ended, providing options for students. There are learning goals such as sharing and co-teaching but these are not forced or measured. The process is the main learning goal. By participating in these creative, group-based exercises, the students start to open up and view themselves, each other, and the systems of which we are a part differently. It happens at a different pace for each person in the circle. To emphasize the importance of these dynamic group exercises as the basis for experiential learning, access, and inclusion in prison education, below I reflect on some of the exercises used in this Introduction to Walls to Bridges class. I would encourage anyone interested in the Inside-Out Program or Walls to Bridges to sign up to take the training to deepen their comprehension of these exercises. Next, I provide an overview of the W2B exercises used in this class.

## ***Noticing and debriefing***

There are two key practices of W2B that are crucial in every class. These are noticing and debriefing. These two practices are integral to the approach to facilitation and learning that W2B fosters. In the first session, W2B facilitators explain to students what noticing is and how to do it. Noticing involves practicing self-awareness and being attentive to how other people are feeling and reacting to events and moments happening in the class. During a debrief, a lot of what people might share are these noticing, these moments of self-awareness or moments when people see or hear how something has affected someone and how they respond to that. The debrief is a crucial aspect of prison education facilitating and learning. The debrief could occur circle style or popcorn style, but it almost always takes place in the big circle. An example of a circle style debrief could be passing a sacred object or taking turns one at a time going around the circle until everyone has shared what they are feeling and thinking. Each person shares, although the facilitator should tell students they can pass too if they feel like it for any reason. Popcorn style means anyone can speak and build on what people are saying or share new ideas, although the facilitator should tell students they should not speak over one another and try to actively listen. Noticing and debriefing are active listening practices that students can learn and apply during the course and in other settings in their lives.

## ***Smudging***

Many students in W2B at Stony Mountain are Indigenous. The contact in Education at Stony Mountain who I was working with on this class is Métis and is capable of leading ceremony. Bringing Indigenous ceremony into W2B is crucial in Treaty 1 territory and anywhere in Canada given the colonial context of state formation and criminal justice in the country. Most Canadian government institutions are colonial institutions built to support settler colonialism. Like other old prisons in Canada such as Kingston Penitentiary, Stony Mountain was erected at the site of a quarry and built by prisoners. Some of the first prisoners at Stony Mountain were criminalized First Nations chiefs who were resisting settler colonialism (Malone, 2017). For these reasons, and as part of efforts at reconciliation and correcting the wrongs of settler colonialism in Canada, the incorporation of Indigenous ceremony and knowledges into W2B classes is crucial. This approach is also reflected in the readings we usually start a Walls to Bridges class with, notably Leroy Little Bear (2000). However, bringing Indigenous ceremony into W2B needs to be done in a good way. Smudging (ceremonial burning of and cleansing with sage) helps to clean the way people hear, see, and talk so they can approach their relations with others in a good way and not carry negative energy from previous interactions with them into their next interactions (Shawanda, 2023). In this class, my contact in Education at Stony Mountain could lead smudging and also describe the meaning and purpose of it. This is not something I would be able to do as a white, middle-class man who could never be a ceremonial knowledge keeper. In addition, many of the inside students at Stony are Indigenous, and they appreciate being able to bring a part of their culture into the classroom and see it valued. Two of the students in this class have led us in ceremony

and in understanding the teachings that smudging offers. This approach emerged organically because the circle is an open space, and a W2B facilitator must be open to people making meaning in the circle in whatever ways works best for them. The W2B facilitator must be open to students and other educators bringing Indigenous ways of knowing into the circle. Smudging is important in W2B because we want to learn with our whole selves, so we need to be able to start the class with open hearts and an open mind. In addition, in a W2B class sometimes emotions and memories come up, so it is important to smudge after class as well. In W2B, people can bring whatever teachings and lessons they carry with them and share them with the group to the extent that they want to.

### ***Wagon wheel***

The wagon wheel exercise is used in many W2B classes as a way of helping students get to know one another during the first week of class. It is a way of hearing about the experiences of others and getting used to interacting and sharing. The wagon wheel is also used throughout the term because the instructor can use it to ask students to share their views about an event or about the readings. The facilitator asks for eight volunteers to form a circle facing outward and then asks for another eight volunteers to form a circle around that other circle facing inward. This results in eight people in a circle facing inward who are face to face with someone in the circle facing outward. The facilitator instructs everyone that they are about to be asked a series of questions. For each question, the people on the inside of the circle will have one minute to share a response, and then the people on the outside will share. After that, the outside circle will rotate so that everyone has a new partner for the next question. This sequence of interaction is repeated for four or five questions, and then the facilitator asks the outside and the inside of the circle to switch. The people who were inside previously are now outside and vice versa. After this, the facilitator asks four or five more questions.

The wagon wheel is different from a conventional university class. Instead of being asked to stay seated, students are asked to move. Instead of being asked to stay silent, everyone in the group is asked to speak and share. Instead of being asked to memorize, the students are asked to remember and feel. Afterwards, everyone goes back to the big circle for a debrief. In a debrief, the facilitator asks general questions about what people shared, what the experience of being inside the circle or outside felt like, and so on. The facilitator asks the students to reflect on what they noticed about how they felt at the beginning and the end. The debrief could be popcorn style, especially if it is early in the term and not everyone feels comfortable sharing yet. The wagon wheel can also be flipped further if the instructor asks a student to become the facilitator of the exercise for a day and come up with questions for the group, with the instructor taking the place of the student.

### ***News flash***

In the spirit of an open and flipped class that promotes active learning, I introduced exercises consistent with the W2B approach and brought in elements of improvisation

and theatre. The news flash exercise involves the facilitator breaking the students into three or four groups and instructing the students to come up with a script for a mock newscast. The students decide which one of them will be the anchor and which will be reporters. Together the group comes up with a short, creative script and some ideas about what the journalists will talk about. The facilitator can give the groups more or less time to work on this activity, and there can be more of an improvisational element to it. This exercise helps people be creative and reflect on what happened during the class or the course. For this class, in Week 1, at the end of our first session, I asked students to give news reports on what happened.

Building on drama and theatre techniques that foster active learning, News Flash is an effective way to review the material and exercises that took place that day. The facilitator only gives a few brief instructions and then turns over the session to the students, and in this sense news flash is a flipped class exercise. I also used News Flash at the end of the course with the same intent of reviewing and integrating course experiences. This activity could be used to reflect on readings for the week as well. These activities are not just for fun. In university classes, students rarely get to be themselves. They are not invited to learn with their whole selves. By contrast, in W2B classes, there is something about acting like somebody else during an improv exercise that allows students to connect with their whole selves and share that with the whole class.

## **Tableaux**

In the tableaux exercise, the facilitator breaks the students into three or four groups, and the students then develop a freeze frame image that represents an idea. The students physically embody an abstract concept in small groups. The concept could be injustice, inequality, justice, or equality, etc. The facilitator can do some warm-up activities during which they ask students to get used to moving around the space and assuming physical poses next to one another. The warm-up activities help people get used to using their bodies in the space and depicting abstract ideas using their bodies. These activities are the bread and butter of drama and theatre classes, and they are usually foreign to typical university classes and lectures. The use of drama and theatre techniques in W2B helps students begin to learn with their whole selves. The facilitator has the option of introducing an idea to each group or letting the group come up with the idea they wish to represent themselves. When a group is in their tableaux, the other groups can move around and guess what is being depicted. There are other variations, such as when the facilitator asks the groups to move from one abstract idea (like injustice) to another (like justice) or to move from one abstract idea to another of their choosing. The facilitator has the option of debriefing the tableaux on the spot or going back to the big circle. The facilitator can give the groups more or less time to work on this. A tableaux can even happen spontaneously if a facilitator calls out an idea and the groups get into a collective pose. This activity could also be used to reflect directly on readings for the week. In this class, I used tableaux in Week 2 and again toward the end of the term as a group assignment worth 5% of the total grade.

## ***Step forward***

Before this exercise, the facilitator must inform students that this could be emotionally challenging and could trigger traumatic memories. There must be a trigger warning before this activity. The questions are meant to prompt students to reflect on inequality. The facilitator asks all the students to line up at one end of the classroom, at the same starting point. Then the facilitator asks a series of questions. Every time a student has experienced something specified in the question, the facilitator asks them to step forward. For example, the facilitator asks students, have you ever gone a night without having had a meal that day? If so, step forward. Have you ever had to spend a night sleeping outside? If so, step forward. Did your family ever experience poverty? If so, step forward. Have you ever been criminalized? If so, step forward. Has anyone in your family ever been criminalized? If so, step forward. Have you ever been kicked out of school? If so, step forward. If you grew up in a rough, poor neighbourhood, step forward. The facilitator can tailor the questions according to the class theme and the readings. I try to use questions about inequality because the goal of Step Forward is to show that everyone in this class is beginning their studies at different starting points. Some students take several steps forward and end up at the other end of the classroom, while some students do not step forward at all, which means they have never experienced any of these hardships.

There are several important options with this exercise to try to ensure people feel safe and are not singled out. For example, during the first part I described, the facilitator can ask people to simply imagine themselves taking a step forward instead of actually stepping forward. With this modification, students do not feel they are being made an example of or feel isolated. This way, no student is made to feel isolated at the other side of class, and they can still report on what they thought of or how many steps they would have taken forward. I would recommend using this modification. There is another modification where the facilitator can be part of the group and step forward with the students. In this modification, the facilitator can disclose their privilege and foster a discussion about privilege in education.

Some students become visibly shaken by the questions, they can feel the separation and the inequality in the room when people start to step forward. It can be emotionally tough. That is why the facilitator should preface everything with a trigger warning. That is why the facilitator should also end Step Forward with something more positive. What I do is ask all the students to come back over to another wall, get onto the same line again, and ask a series of more uplifting questions, such as do you want to be close to friends and family in the future? If so, step forward. Do you want to advance your education in the future? If so, step forward. Do you want to be a physically, mentally, and spiritually healthy person in the future? If so, step forward. This is a positive note to end on and it can bring people back or give them some hope because inevitably, in this second part of it, everyone moves forward together. Almost every single person makes all those steps.

It is crucial to debrief this exercise. We return to the big circle, and this can be an emotional debrief because people may share a story about what they are feeling. Some people may talk about poverty, others may talk about physical abuse. The students see that some of their peers have faced a lot more trauma, and some have

faced a lot more inequality, and they also see that they have things in common. Perhaps some of the inside and outside students have some things in common that they did not assume that they would. This is something to do in Week 4 or Week 5 once the group is feeling more unified.

Similar to Wagon Wheel, with Step Forward, people are teaching each other. The activity is physical and emotional. Students are learning with their whole selves. By the end, people might be emotionally drained. The facilitator should ask students to get up in the big circle and shake their arms out, physically shaking out the feelings that they experienced. We may have a five-minute break and then return. The facilitator should notice if anyone is still feeling emotionally unsettled and try to connect with them during the break. I have heard other W2B instructors say that step forward should not be used because it isolates the inside students and puts them in a vulnerable position. That is an important point, because as facilitators we do not want to cause harm or further trauma. At the same time, I have heard inside students say that step forward is the most impactful exercise in the class and that it is suitable to use if the preamble and setup are thorough and the debrief is thoughtful and caring.

### ***Archaeology of knowledge***

In this exercise, it is the year 2750. It is the future. There has been a series of global cataclysms and a lot of the planet has been covered over with sediment. In the future, people are discovering places like Stony Mountain, this prison. In this imagined future, what is interesting is that people have learned to live without prisons and social control. People have learned how to work together, share resources, not engage in transgression, and not punish one another. Some archaeologists stumble upon this classroom, and they stumble upon the rest of the prison, which all the students have been through by this point in class (week 6 or 7). They all have a background and experiences to share to provide an analysis of the prison during this exercise. The inside students obviously live in the prison, while the outside students have seen a lot of what happens in the prison making their way to class each week. (I never engaged in tours, however, which is an issue that has been addressed elsewhere, see Piché and Walby, 2010).

The goal of this improv exercise is to get students to report on what is happening in the classroom compared to what is happening elsewhere in the prison. The facilitator divides the students into groups, giving the students a few minutes to plan out what they will say. They can either give a press conference or they can give a kind of moment-by-moment excavation of the site. In the first scenario, the presentation is like a news conference, similar to News Flash, so I do encourage students to try the second scenario. In the second scenario, each person or archaeologist in the group addresses something about what they see, such as what is going on with the food, with surveillance, or the cells. Then they make it to the classroom as part of this archaeological dig, and then each one of them again gets to say something about what was happening in the W2B classroom. In this class, a lot of the students reported they were trying to build community, trying to teach each other, and trying to overcome stereotypes and stigma. They were trying to build the world of the future, a world without transgression and punishment. Overall, the students get to

do some role-playing while reflecting on what is happening in the prison compared to what is happening in our W2B classroom. I used this exercise during Week 7, an ideal time in the course to reflect and integrate ideas.

### ***Invisible knapsack***

In this exercise, again it is a post-apocalyptic dystopian future. There have been global cataclysms, and among those who survived the cataclysm were the students in this W2B class. Not many people from the old world are still alive, but some of those who are alive are people who are in this class. The facilitator divides the students into groups of four again. The groups pretend to be hiking along, trying to survive, and they have invisible knapsacks with them. In their knapsack, each one of them must bring something from the W2B class to the future that will help them survive and help humanity begin again in the future.

In the knapsack, the students are carrying an abstract idea with them, and they must share it with the other students. By this point in the course, the students should understand the principles and values of W2B. The students start by hiking around. Maybe there is some improv comedy involved at the start of the performance, then they sit down at the campfire and they each take something out of their knapsack. They might bring out concepts like community, belonging, inclusion, critical thinking, or smudging, whatever means something to them. Both Archaeology of Knowledge and Invisible Knapsack ask students to reflect on the whole class, the lessons they are going to take away from the class, as well as the key ideas that they have been sharing with one another. These exercises reinforce the key messages that they take from the readings and the other activities.

### ***Bridge the gap and W2B musical chairs***

One of the assignments in this class required students to design their own inclusive, creative W2B exercise. This is another dimension of the flipped approach I took in the class, since I literally turned the class over to the groups for the whole session. Around Week 10, I planned a presentation of inclusive group education activities that the students themselves devised. These presentations can take a while because four groups need to present. Each one of them will run an activity, and in most weeks there is only time to run two or three activities depending on how the debriefs unfold. The students prepared some great exercises/assignments for this class. One exercise was called Bridge the Gap, and another was called W2B Musical Chairs.

For Bridge the Gap, the student facilitators first asked for five or six volunteers. The students asked the participants to line up down the middle of the class in a single file line. The facilitators had a series of questions. The facilitators tell the participants the instructions. If the participants agree with the question, they step to the right. If the participants disagree with the question, they step to the left. The questions could sometimes be controversial or provocative, which is the way the students designed the exercise. For example, if you met someone who was poor, would you feel like giving them money if you had some? Yes or no? Participants moved to one side or the other, then the facilitators asked us to turn and face the

people on the other side of the room, and called for a discussion. There was discussion among the participants who said yes and among the participants who said no. The participants took turns talking about their points of view. Then the facilitators brought the participants back into the middle, asking another question. It was a good activity because it led to reflection and it was physical. A facilitator could tailor the questions to suit the readings or other concepts (such as inequality) depending on the week or course.

For W2B Musical Chairs, the student facilitators started by telling the big group to set up the chairs on the inside of the circle facing out. The student facilitators gave a few instructions about musical chairs and reminded everyone not to shove one another. The music starts, and the participants tried to find a seat. There would be one less chair each time. Here is the W2B twist: the person who is removed from the circle must address the rest of the group and say one thing out loud that they will remember about this class. Then the participant would write that memory on a big paper card. The musical chairs game proceeded, participants kept saying what they would remember forever about the class, and by the end the group had created a big card out of a flip chart turned on its side. It serves as a keepsake for the class and it is full of all these great insights. After, the group that facilitated this activity ran a debrief to consolidate the teachings and experiences. This is a great activity to do near the end of the term as it is fun, and fosters contemplation and remembering.

These exercises all have limits. Facilitators (and students) must strive to ensure everyone in the group is included, and nobody is feeling alienated or excluded. If people disagree about an issue, this can be addressed in the debrief in a non-confrontational way by speaking into the circle. All W2B exercises are meant to be inclusive, active, collective, and oriented toward co-teaching and co-learning. It is great to see the students grasp these ideas at the end of the class, designing these exercises and thinking about how they might use them in the future too.

### ***Assignments in the context of flipped classrooms and ungrading***

In terms of other assignments, I set some parameters in advance to provide structure to the class. I decided there would be a final writing assignment about inclusive pedagogy and lessons learned from Walls to Bridges, and I decided there would be eight weekly summaries required. This provided some structure and goals for students to focus on. Even with the focus on flipped classroom exercises that are totally student-driven as described above, I have found that students do appreciate some structure if it is open and flexible. To this end, I provided options for some assignments. The options included a zine, a group presentation, group creation of a W2B exercise, and others. The zine was in the form of a collage, using magazine clippings and drawings. All of the zines addressed themes such as access to education and inclusive learning. The students determined what would happen with the zines and the students also decided on the rubrics and evaluation procedures for the final paper and the other assignments.

The goal of this approach is to get students reflecting on the assignments and designing them, rather than just completing them like hoops to jump through or boxes to check. In addition, the way I marked the assignments followed an ungrading

approach, grading for growth and rewarding students who developed a lot as people and scholars (also see Stommel, 2024, p. 338 on alternative assessments). This goes against protocol for grading within the university, however it is necessary to push back against protocol for grading within the university if one wants to integrate ungrading into their prison education practice. Again, there is no point in replacing the structure of the traditional prison with the structure of the traditional university education system, which would simply reproduce “structural inequities of education” (Stommel, 2024, p. 329). The main idea behind a flipped classroom and ungrading is that if students feel like they are stakeholders in the process, they will get more out of the class and put more into it too. Students also learn about inclusive education from the inside, by participating in making these decisions rather than simply being subject to them.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper shares insights about the benefits of running an Introduction to Walls to Bridges class. This is a flipped class that focuses on process rather than fixed content, with the goal of fostering active learning. Connecting the practices of flipped classes and ungrading (Gorichanaz, 2024; Li et al., 2023; O’Flaherty & Phillips, 2015; Rapchak et al., 2023; Stommel, 2024) to the W2B philosophy provides prison education with an expanded goal orientation and critical mindset. The use of flipped classes and ungrading enhances access and inclusion in prison education. In terms of practical implications, this paper shares new W2B exercises instructors might consider for their classes. For collectives that are running Walls to Bridges or Inside-Out programs, they may wish to try instituting an Introduction to Walls to Bridges class as part of their curricula to bring inside and outside students together who are taking a W2B class for the first time. Some students are ready for W2B classes with more serious and significant content and assignments. Others are not, and an Introduction to Walls to Bridges class might be a good way to engage those more cautious students in Walls to Bridge specifically and post-secondary education generally.

The W2B style creates an approach to education in which people feel like they belong and can make a difference for others and in their own lives. University education is often about memorizing, competing, and boosting the ego. This conventional approach to university education can be harmful and alienate people from wanting to advance their studies. In this sense, this paper contributes to literature on prison education, and it also adds to the literatures on access to education and inclusive pedagogy in North America by arguing that flipped classes and ungrading should be treated as core principles in prison education. Many people in society have been excluded from the education system because they did not comply or obey, or they were not ready for it. It can take years before someone decides to give education another try. This is certainly the case for many of the Indigenous students at Stony Mountain. This is where access to education matters. Hopefully this class and W2B provide some more substance to the idea of access to education. Access to education should not simply be rhetorical as it often is in university promotions and marketing (Macfarlane, 2013). It should not merely be about opening up more seats in the university that are never filled because of the

barriers for racialized students living in poverty. Access to education should not only mean bringing people to the main campus who may have otherwise never been there. In that case, the experience of a university class where the students are treated mainly like numbers among hundreds of others is often alienating and problematic. Instead, access to education must be about meeting people where they are at. W2B does this by meeting incarcerated people where they are at. This model can also be used in other locations such as halfway houses, shelters, and other places where system-exposed people, who deserve a chance to try university education, reside. As I have argued, a focus on flipped classes and ungrading should be core principles in doing this work, and I would encourage other scholars to report on their attempts to bring flipped classes and ungrading into their teaching. I would also contend that these exercises and the flipped approach are portable and can be brought into post-secondary education more broadly. If this approach is transformative in the prison, it can be transformative in the traditional university classroom too.

In this paper I have explored elements of a class called Introduction to Walls to Bridges, notably how flipping the class and ungrading advance access to education and inclusion. I think that this kind of class should be the first class in any prison education programme, be it W2B or Inside-Out, because it is the most effective way of introducing students to this experiential approach to education. This course and the focus on flipping the class and ungrading can help foster the ultimate goal of prison education, which is to advance access to education for all, not simply providing access to a classroom where they get told what and how to think, but to facilitate an encounter with others that fosters their own inner learner and teacher.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

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