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Inmate Education as a Service Learning Opportunity for Students: Preparation, Benefits, and Lessons Learned

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Inmate Education as a Service Learning Opportunity for Students: Preparation, Benefits, and Lessons Learned

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Abstract

There is mounting evidence that prison inmates benefit from educational opportunities but may not be afforded them. In addition, when they are offered, priority is given to prisoners who will be released in the near future, and those serving long-term or life sentences are less likely to have access to classes. A service learning opportunity was created where students taught a life span development class to women serving long-term sentences. This article provides a guide to setting up the class while avoiding obstacles along the way. It also outlines benefits to students, inmates, supervising faculty, and society. In order to teach, students must apply what they have learned, and the prison experience challenges them to consider their power and privilege.

Keywords

prison, inmates, developmental psychology, service learning

The importance of offering educational opportunities to prison inmates has been discussed for years (Johnson, 1969; Vacca, 2004). In particular, advocates suggest that education is a form of rehabilitation that can facilitate reentry and decrease recidivism (Fox, 1987; Papa, 2014). Thus, education benefits both the prisoner and society. The impact on the prisoner can extend beyond reentry considerations. Researchers have found educational opportunities can reestablish a sense of identity (Marken, 1974), empower prisoners (Shafer, 2001), foster self-worth and personal pride (Hawke & Ritter, 1988), and decrease disciplinary problems (Hall, 1990). These benefits have occurred through exposure to a variety of courses including literature, biology, sociology, art, public health, and basic education.

Various authors have examined the impact of teaching in prison on both inmates and educators. Erickson (2001) taught sociology to a group of inmates and noticed that she gained ''unanticipated'' insight and teaching skills as well as enhanced her abilities as a university educator. Rudin (1998) instructed identical business courses to inmates and undergraduate students and noted that his experience with the inmates disconfirmed his preconceived notions that inmates would cheat and/or have less ''moral character.'' In addition, the inmates outperformed university students and were more motivated.

Despite these benefits, there are many obstacles to teaching in a prison setting. These can include inadequate facilities and reluctant instructors, but perhaps the most insurmountable obstacle is funding. When the prison budget does allow for educational opportunities, these are generally offered to inmates serving short-term sentences as they will be the most likely to return to society. This can be frustrating to inmates serving long-term sentences as programming and educational opportunities are either not offered to them or they are repeatedly wait-listed for classes. This often makes long-term inmates reliant on volunteers to provide teaching or programming.

Fortunately, there has been an increasing emphasis on academic–community partnerships. One such partnership that is just beginning to be explored is an academic–prison partnership. Formal service learning opportunities for college students to teach inmates create invaluable educational experiences for everyone. However, setting up such an academic–prison partnership can be a daunting task for supervising faculty. The following is a step-by-step guide on where to start and how to avoid obstacles. It was created after five semesters of offering directed study credit to over 25 graduate students who have taught a life span development class in a women's prison.

Creating a Proposal

The first step in planning this type of partnership is to create two proposals, one for prison officials and one for your

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department and potential college student instructors. The prison proposal should include the target group of inmates (e.g., inmates serving long-term or short-term sentences), suggested enrollment limits, potential topics, a generic syllabus, and an estimate as to how long the class will last per semester. A proposal facilitates communication and planning with the prison and allows prison personnel input into which course will be taught, generating interest and ownership. Although it is possible to initiate the approval process through the department of corrections for the state, it was only feasible for us to work with one prison so the director of psychological services and the warden for that prison were contacted. The director of psychological services was contacted because she was our prison liaison. In order to begin a partnership, it is best to reach out to someone of authority within the prison, such as the warden, as well as someone who would act as a liaison within the prison. The liaison coordinates escorts for students, facilitates selection of inmates, and handles issues related to inmate restriction and security.

Although the warden chose the life span development class over two other proposed classes (introduction to psychology and abnormal psychology), all other course planning, including selection of the book, was left to the instructor. Once our proposal was sent to the prison, the warden approved it within weeks. However, this process can involve more steps and can take much longer.

The first time we offered the class, there was so much interest in the class that the lifers group held a lottery and selected 12 inmates and 2 alternates. The names were then forwarded to our prison liaison who provided them with a syllabus and explained their commitment. Since that time, interested lifers and long-term inmates have been able to put their names on a wait list for the class. The current wait list has over 40 inmates. So far, we have never had an inmate miss or drop the class due to disciplinary action. Inmates are screened and made aware of the commitment before they enroll. In general, these inmates are minimum security due to their positive actions and behavior. We have had an inmate drop the class for unknown reasons but have never had an inmate leave the class because of disciplinary issues. If so, they would no doubt lose all class privileges.

The second proposal is for the university and students. This outlines how much credit will be offered, student responsibilities, and grading protocol. Our course lasts a semester (14 weeks) and enrolls 4–5 students. The students teach in pairs for 10 weeks, which means every student teaches approximately 4–5 times. After each class, one of the students sends an e-mail to the group of student instructors indicating how the class went, the topics covered, any problems within the group, questions inmates had, homework assignments, and tips for the next class. Additionally, one student must repeat the next week to ensure continuity. Each week students review their course preparations with the professor before they go to teach. Another requirement is that students read the course book (Santrock, 2007) and a book that they select, and the instructor approves, on teaching techniques. These books ranged from classics like *McKeachie's Teaching Tips* (McKeachie & Svinicki, 2013) to *Teaching Psychology: A Step by Step Guide* (Lucas & Berstein, 2014). They report on this book to the class at the end of the semester. Before the course starts, students generally meet 3–4 times to plan and learn as to how to teach and resources. This also provides an opportunity for them to become acquainted with each other and to learn about prison etiquette. Once they begin teaching, in addition to one-on-one meetings with the instructor, there are beginning, midpoint, and end classes that all students attend. Students receive three semester hours of directed study credit.

Preparing for the Partnership

Preparing for the partnership will involve gathering materials needed for the class such as books and recruiting student instructors. An older edition of an introduction to life span development book (Santrock, 2007) was chosen because it could be acquired for less than a dollar per book, but the materials were still current. The newer editions contained electronic resources that inmates cannot access. Other options for finding books could be to ask for donations from publishers or desk copies from colleagues.

An announcement was sent to all students who were enrolled in our program, inviting them to participate. Approximately one fifth (20/100) of the students responded, and student instructors were chosen based on seniority in the program, an interest in forensic psychology, and diversity variables such as race and gender. For example, it is preferable if at least one male can be in the group of students, as it can be a good opportunity for women in prison to establish a positive relationship with a male. Students selected as instructors have had one or two semesters of diversity training as part of their program requirements.

Implementing and Maintaining the Partnership

Most prisons will require volunteers to complete extensive paperwork and undergo background checks as part of their security process. This paperwork and information should be submitted 6–8 weeks in advance of teaching. If the class is to be taught in the spring, it is a good idea to meet in the middle of the fall, generally when registration begins, to start this process. In addition, any other paperwork can be completed such as directed study forms or university service learning contracts. At that point, students also begin to construct their syllabus and training on teaching techniques. Students prepare their class like any college class, and although they can look over prior class preparations, they need to create their own course content. Over time, the syllabus has evolved as each group has shaped the class. Students can also decide how they intend to measure student learning and what topics they will cover. For example, homework assignments have included reflection papers, and final assignments have ranged from projects to presentations which incorporate material learned in class into the inmate's life story. The topics covered have typically followed chapters

in the book, but students may choose to go more in depth about a particular topic and/or delete chapters. All assignments are handwritten, and inmates are responsible for bringing their own supplies such as pencil and paper. Inmates do not have access to word processing or e-mail. Grading for all assignments and for the class is on a pass/fail basis, with attendance factoring into the grading as well.

Once the partnership has been established, maintaining it is much less time-consuming. Books have been bought, a liaison has been established, and the prison is engaged. Most of the work is in training students to teach. There is a wait list of students and inmates who want to take advantage of this opportunity. As such, inmates and students are not allowed to repeat the course.

Each semester, the faculty member supervising the course attends the first and last class to set the tone, explain who we are and why we are teaching this class, and administer a measure of knowledge about the topic before the class begins. It is noted on the syllabus, and discussed that first day, that the inmates will not receive college credit for the class. Since most inmates are serving life or long-term sentences, this is not an issue. They take the class because they want to learn and level of education is not considered a barrier to taking the class. For weeks 2–9, the pair of students teach the class with no corrections personnel present. At the last class, several assessments are administered including a course evaluation, the same knowledge test, and a measure of personal impact. These data have been instrumental in demonstrating the effectiveness of the partnership to university and prison personnel. The institutional review board was contacted prior to administering any assessments, but approval was not necessary.

Method

Participants

All of the inmates who enrolled in the course were women. Although we did not ask for specific demographics such as age or race, only women who were serving long-term or life sentences could enroll in the course. Most of them had indeterminate sentences or sentences with "a tail," such as 15 years to life. However, a few of these women had consecutive sentences, which made their parole date beyond their life expectancy.

Measures

Knowledge test. A knowledge test with 1 broad-based item from each chapter of the book was administered on the first and last days of class. This test was revised 2 times so the latest version has only been administered to three classes. The knowledge test was revised because the student instructors considered it too difficult. The students have struggled with selecting broad-based items, and some questions have been too specific (e.g., at what age is a child first able to recognize himself or herself in a mirror?). They have learned valuable lessons on test construction. However, this scale continues to be revised, and so inmate's self-report of knowledge gained was included in the Perceived Impact Scale.

Perceived Impact Scale. Inmates self-report the impact the class had on their level of knowledge, abilities, and other characteristics. Initially, inmates were provided a self-esteem scale to measure impact. However, it was clear in their personal reflections that this was not the correct construct to measure. In those reflections, they discussed impact on constructs such as self-awareness, emotional growth, and confidence. Following completion of the first class, a focus group was held with inmates who had completed the class to determine in what ways it had impacted them. There were no scales available in the literature to measure the array of constructs they identified as having changed so a scale was created. The instructions for this scale ask inmates to grade themselves on the items using the grading scale they used in school from "A" (4.0) to "F" (0.0). This scale was administered during the last class, and inmates provide *two* ratings that day, one for their recalled assessment of themselves on that construct *before* the course and one for their current assessment on the construct *after* the course. It was decided not to administer this as pre-post but as a posttest because respondents may overestimate their scores before the course. Dunning, Johnson, Ehrlinger, and Kruger (2003) indicated that people are unaware of their incompetence, and "This lack of awareness arises because poor performers are doubly cursed: Their lack of skill deprives them not only of the ability to produce correct responses, but also of the expertise necessary to surmise that they are not producing them" (p. 83). Most of the women enrolled in the classes did not have any college education, and some did not have a high school degree. They would classify as poor academic performers, yet they may not see themselves as such, especially when compared to their peers. It is certainly likely they would have assessed their skills at a higher level before the course and then after the course assessed themselves at the same level. More importantly, the scale was assessing the *perceived* impact that the women believed the course had on them. When the scale is only administered at the end of the course, and the numbers differ, respondents perceived the course had an impact on them.

Course evaluations. Inmates complete a short 3-item evaluation of each class meeting to provide feedback to the student instructors and a 17-item course evaluation at the end of the course. The final evaluation includes sections on the structure of the course, the content and workload, the overall quality of the instructors, and the contributions the course made to their learning. This scale was revised after teaching the class 1 time because the prior scale was more applicable to a traditional college class (e.g., "Was the instructor available outside of classes?"). It is a Likert-type scale of 1 (*agree*) to 5 (*disagree*).

Student/instructor self-rating. The first time this course was taught, instructors completed a series of reflection questions regarding the class (e.g., What did you learn about yourself today? What did you learn about working in a prison? What did you learn about the inmates?). At the end of the semester, all of the responses were collected and a thematic analysis was conducted. Three researchers independently examined their

Table 1. Inmate Perceived Impact Scale Results.

Knowledge of	Before	After
Human development	1.59	3.39**
Human behavior	1.68	3.43**
Genetics/biology	1.41	3.05**
Diseases of aging	1.73	3.32**
Psychological material	1.56	3.14**
Other people's behavior	1.81	4.0**
The different developmental experiences of others	1.70	3.16**
Development of children	1.84	3.41**
Family history patterns	1.61	3.36**
Parenting skills	1.57	3.30**
Your future development	1.75	3.30**
The role environment plays in human development	1.80	3.45*
How my past experiences have influenced who I have become today	1.77	3.63**
Level of		
Motivation	2.25	3.50**
Self-awareness	1.91	3.48**
Confidence	1.91	3.41**
Assertiveness	1.93	3.27**
Emotional growth	1.91	3.48**
Healing	1.75	3.20**
Trust	1.30	2.64**
Self-acceptance	1.70	3.11**
Acceptance of others	1.57	3.07**
Self-efficacy	1.91	3.07**
Ability to		
Trust	1.18	2.68**
Cope	1.86	2.98**
Heal	1.86	2.98**
Mentor others	2.30	3.55**
Be open with family	1.75	3.05**
Be open with friends	1.65	3.21**
Express thoughts and feelings	1.72	3.19**
Contribute meaningful ideas	1.98	3.23**
Control your life	1.81	3.33**
Be a good role model	2.25	3.45**
Think critically	2.05	3.21**
Understanding of others	1.84	3.30**

Note. $N = 44$.
**Significant at $p < .001$.

reflection responses, analyzing them for common, recurring themes. The themes and questions were used to create a more objective assessment measure that would be completed by student instructors at the end of the next teaching experience. The last two semesters, this scale has also included a section where students rate the inmates on numerous characteristics such as enthusiasm, effort, ability, and motivation on a scale from 1 (*very high*) to 5 (*very low*).

Results

Knowledge Test

The average inmate score on the knowledge test after the course ($M = 7.71$, $SD = 1.88$) was significantly higher than that before the course, $M = 6.76$, $SD = 2.12$, $t(28) = -3.20$, $p < .01$, $d = -0.60$. Overall, 59% of the women increased their scores, 24% remained the same, and 17% decreased. Any inmate who did not have a matched pre- and posttest was excluded from the analysis.

Table 2. Student Instructor Impact Scale Results.

Item	*Mean*	*SD*
This class increased my interest in teaching in a forensic setting	1.46	0.82
This class increased my level of enjoyment in teaching	1.62	0.57
This class made me more aware of my power and privilege	1.54	0.58
This class made me appreciate my freedom	1.31	0.55
This class made me more aware of the things I take for granted	1.54	0.58
This class made me feel more confident	1.65	0.57
This class made me aware of my stereotypes of prisoners	1.62	0.60
This class made me aware of my stereotypes on the prison system	1.69	0.58
This class gave me a greater understanding of the circumstances that lead the prisoners to be incarcerated	1.54	0.58
This class gave a better understanding of the hardships that women in prison face	1.15	0.27
Overall I found the prison to be less restrictive than I expected	2.08	0.56
Overall I found the prison staff to be dissatisfied	3.25	0.62
Overall I found the conditions for prisoners to be unacceptable	2.75	0.75
Overall I found the conditions for prison staff to be unacceptable	3.18	0.87

Note. 1 = *strongly agree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*; $N = 13$.

Perceived Impact Scale

Table 1 provides the items for this scale. According to both parametric and nonparametric (Wilcoxon signed rank test) statistics, the differences between pre- and post-perceptions were significant for all items. Family-wise error was controlled for using a Bonferroni correction. In addition, at the end of the scale, the women were asked to answer the following item, "Overall, how has this human developmental class affected your sense of purpose on a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being *no impact* and 5 being *a strong impact*?" The mean was 4.68 ($SD = 0.62$).

Student/Instructor Self-Rating

Results from this measure are included in Table 2. Students *agree* to *strongly agree* that the directed study increased their interest in teaching and in teaching in forensic settings. The class also made them more aware of their stereotypes, power, and privilege. A second part to this scale measuring students' ratings of inmates on numerous characteristics was added after three semesters, and the results are included in Table 3.

Table 3. Student Ratings of Inmate Characteristics.

Characteristic	*Mean*	*SD*
Enthusiasm	1.25	0.46
Motivation	1.88	0.83
Energy	1.85	0.64
Effort	1.38	0.52
Ability	2.38	0.74
Ability to apply material	2	0.76
Appreciation of learning opportunity	1	0
Friendliness	1.25	0.46
Interest in understanding themselves and their lives	1.13	0.35
Openness to sharing personal stories	2	0.76

Note. $N = 8$.

Table 4. Inmate Course Evaluations.

Item	*Mean*	*SD*
The syllabus provided clear objectives for the course	1.06	0.25
There was a reasonable amount of reading, writing, and assignments	1.18	0.58
The evaluation methods (homework and exams) used were fair and reflected the objectives of the course	1.06	0.25
The course required a lot of work	2.74	1.44
The homework assignments were valuable in helping me learn	1.07	0.36
I kept up with the readings that were required	1.18	0.46
I actively paid attention and participated in class	1.06	0.35
This course improved my ability to communicate with others effectively	1.38	0.60
The course improved my ability to express myself in writing	1.42	0.79
The course improved my factual knowledge in developmental psychology	1.09	0.39
The instructors were prepared for class sessions	1.06	0.25
The instructors provided opportunities for questions and discussions	1.02	0
The responses to questions raised during classes were adequate	1.06	0.24
The instructors held my attention	1.06	0
Having multiple instructors was an asset to the course	1.00	0
The overall quality of the course was excellent	1.00	0
I would recommend this course to others	1.00	0

Note. $N = 33$.

Course Evaluations

Responses indicate that the women believe the course improves their ability to communicate with others more effectively, express themselves in writing, and increase their knowledge of life span development. Questions are included in Table 4. The mean for all items, except one, has consistently been in the 1–1.42 range. The only exception is the item, ''The course required a lot of work ($M = 2.74$).'' *Every* inmate who has responded to the course evaluation has said the course was excellent and she would recommend it to others. A typical comment on the course evaluation is, ''I found extremely valuable how our upbringing affects the aspects of my life. I understand why I have come to prison. The knowledge I have gained I share with everyone! Friends, family.''

Discussion

The purpose of this article was to provide a guide to setting up a prison–academic partnership while avoiding obstacles. The initial time teaching the course can be frustrating and time-consuming, but this guide should facilitate the process. Assessments have always been included in the course to demonstrate to prison officials that the course was having a positive impact. The scales are included here to use or not use and to administer before and after the class or as postassessments. All of these assessments, of the inmates and of the student teachers, suggest that the course is beneficial for inmates and for students. Although the knowledge test indicates that learning is occurring, it may not be an accurate indicator of how much learning is actually taking place. The students have constructed the scale, but it may be weak in construct validity and could be revised again. However, the real impact for the inmates seems to be on a more personal level. The material has helped them to understand themselves and their family and friends.

This same thing is true for the university students. Although they are exposed to and experience some of the intricacies of teaching, the real impact is on their understanding of other people. Many students have never interacted with a prisoner and have colorful stereotypes about who prisoners are, particularly those serving life sentences. Exposure to this population helps them to dispel these inaccurate beliefs and makes them acutely aware of their own power and privilege.

Lessons Learned

This section is provided to help expedite the process of establishing an academic–prison partnership. Although initially setting up the partnership can involve some time, afterward, like most courses, the amount of preparation is greatly diminished. Moreover, having the process outlined here will reduce the overall planning time.

First, prison protocol, such as forms and policies, can change suddenly. Volunteers may be the last to receive notice of changes. Initially, students did not need to complete any paperwork to teach the class. The fourth time the class was offered, students had to complete extensive paperwork, have thorough background checks, and undergo Prison Rape Elimination Act training, which consisted of watching a video. Although the prison may be appreciative of the classes, it is a very small part of prison responsibilities. The background checks delayed the start of the class twice. Therefore, it is important to maintain frequent contact with the liaison overseeing the project. The liaison is ultimately responsible to the facility for the success or failure of the course so ensure that the liaison remains informed and has input into the structure of the course. Continually check on paperwork, inmate selection, and scheduling. The liaison is not the only one in the prison to process the paperwork and it can be lost at any stage. Make

copies of everything and send reminders when there is a change in protocol. For example, it is a good idea to have gate passes (permission from prison officials) for every instructor for every week in case of last-minute substitutions. If the instructors bring food 1 week, the instructors *and the food* need gate passes. There is a separate gate pass for the food. After a while, you will become aware of the nuances in prison rules. Rules, terminology, and protocol differ from prison to prison.

Second, expect the unexpected, do not assume anything, and always check and recheck. The prison may be a long drive, and if it is on lockdown, class cannot be taught. Bad weather can stall the class at any time. Have extra weeks available at the end of a quarter or semester in order to make up any missed classes.

Third, as much as possible, make sure students are aware of proper dress code and protocol. What might be proper dress code in most settings may not be for the facility. The wrong pants may result in being denied access to the facility.

Fourth, schedule instructors in advance and know who can substitute. Select your instructors carefully. Ensure that your instructor group is not only diverse, but that all students are mature enough to teach in a prison. In other words, they can follow the rules and will be respectful of the environment including the inmates and staff.

Benefits of a Partnership

This partnership benefits the student instructors, supervising faculty, long-term inmates, and society. Student instructors get an opportunity to test their competency in the material as they are asked to apply what they have learned throughout their training. In addition, they are exposed to a prison population and gain a better understanding of their own power and privilege through working with this population. For student instructors, it can also provide empowerment in regard to their professional growth as well as valuable teaching experience. Student instructors find the inmates to be engaged and enthusiastic learners (see Table 3).

Supervising faculty may find it incredibly rewarding to create an experience that has such a positive impact on students and inmates. In addition, they can use this experience to integrate their teaching, service, and scholarship. Finally, as funding begins to return to prison teaching (Papa, 2014), experience in this setting may open up funding opportunities. The U.S. Department of Education outlines these opportunities in *Partnerships Between Community Colleges and Prisons Providing Workforce Education and Training to Reduce Recidivism* (2009).

For inmates, perceived benefits include an increase in self-awareness, an alleviation of boredom, and contact with the outside world. In addition, they gain knowledge and a sense of accomplishment. Student instructors will see their inmate students as people, and this can assist in dispelling some of the stereotypes associated with prison and inmates. In turn, they can use this knowledge and educate others around them. For society, there can be a reduction in the stigma associated with inmates. In this way, there can be a decrease in the obstacles inmates may deal with in regard to reentering society, which can impact recidivism. Overall, this type of program can positively impact students, inmates, and society through the growth that both inmates and students have throughout the experience.

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