

*Alchemy in Prison*¹

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Each week I go to prison to meet a class of 36 women. Half of them are university students majoring in psychology (or women's studies or criminal justice) and the other half are incarcerated for various reasons. We meet for 2 ½ hours a week and as the 36 students write and talk together the barriers dissolve and they begin to see themselves in the other.

I have received both too much and too little credit for teaching this class.ⁱ Too much credit comes from friends, colleagues, the students and prison staff who value this classⁱⁱ. Too little credit comes from the university's accounting system that counts only the registered college students. The women in prison do not count. But neither the personal nor institutional levels of credit affect me—instead it is the experience itself that I treasure—the opportunity to see students transform themselves and each other, the chance to witness alchemy.

This class has the somewhat unfortunate rubric of “service learning,” which sounds as though we are going to “help” prisoners (Pompa, 2003). Some of the university students have this idea when they register; they want to help and ask how we will do this. I tell them we are going to prison not to help but to learn. Others think we are going to study the women in prison, to observe or interview and learn why they are there. Wrong

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again—we are not going to observe or study the women on the inside any more than the women on the inside are going to observe or study the college students. Of course there will be some mutual observation, but the primary purpose of the class is to study together, to become classmates, to be equals for the duration of the class period. This is how the alchemy begins.

Teaching a class with equal numbers of outside and inside students prepares the ground for an old social psychological principle to work—the principle that equal status contact between two groups of people can change attitudes, lessen stereotypes, remove prejudice (Allport, 1979; Mackie & Smith, 2002). Achieving equal status between people who have obviously unequal privileges requires more than parity in numbers, however. The freedom of half the group to leave prison at the end of each class is only one of many factors straining my credibility when I say the 36 students will be “equal classmates” for the semester. The university students’ access to tuition money, jobs, a clean record and a promising future are part of the cumulative inequalities, so am I lying when I say they will be “equals” in class? Not entirely, for without some experience of equality the changes that we witness could not occur.

The process I call alchemy, is not anything I can make happen. I can create the conditions to enable the process but the actual occurrence is a result of the women’s interactions. They make it happen and I am the witness.

The following account comes from the Fall of 2002, the first time I taught the class.

Both groups were nervous the first week as I met them separately. The women on the inside worried what the college students would think—would these outsiders devalue their intelligence, morals, motherhood, and worth? The college students likewise worried—would the women inside be hostile, consider the students spoiled, voyeuristic, judgmental, and naïve? After the second week when they met together for the first time, both groups expressed surprise at how “nice” their new classmates were, how different from what they had expected. The university students told me as we left the prison how much more like themselves the women inside were than they had imagined. Numerous students came out after our first day in prison saying “that could be me.” When I next talked with the women on the inside they too said the experience of meeting together was not what they expected—the students were much friendlier, more down to earth. No one said so boldly that the university students were “just like us” or “that could be me,” perhaps they thought this would sound presumptuous. But I heard their relief at not feeling judged or looked down upon.

After the first class together which included numerous ice-breaking exercises, the 30 women looked forward to seeing each other every week. I lectured very little, and if I gave a mini lecture I sensed their eagerness to return to small group discussions and projects where they learned the most from each other. What they learned from each other is more memorable than anything I could have told them because the lessons were based in experience, in laughter and in tears.

Toward the end of the semester one of the women on the inside told us she would not attend the last class and the closing ceremony because she was being released. What

might seem like cause for celebration and congratulations became on occasion for fear. She was afraid she would disappoint her children. She had been released and recommitted once before, and her children were twice placed in another person's care. She and everyone in the room worried--would she be able to stay out this time? Was her drug rehabilitation sufficient? Would she find adequate treatment facilities for herself? Could she find work? Could she promise her children nothing like this would happen again?

No lecture on being an incarcerated mother could convey the hopes and fears we felt in that moment. No assignment could substitute for the experience.

The university students described how they had their preconceptions challenged and came to feel "as one" with women on the inside.

"Being on the Same Level" and "Working as one"

After a class exercise in which each woman wrote about times when she had given something to another and received something from another, a university student wrote:

... women in my group were very open and willing to share with us pieces of their past. One woman said that she would much rather give than receive because of the satisfaction it gives her. She said one of the greatest things that has ever happened to her was giving birth to her children. I thought her story was simply beautiful and I am so glad that she was able to share this story with the rest of us. The fact that they confided in us lets me know that they trust us and see us as being on the same level.

After the discussion, we talked a bit about what activities we wanted to do in order to fix up the visiting room. Then, we were given paper and markers and created our very own coloring book. I really enjoyed this activity because of the obvious unity between the [prison] women and the Temple students. There were no barriers, no feelings of superiority or inferiority. We were all working together as one in this project to complete our goal in redoing the visiting room.

... We live in a society, which pollutes our view on almost everything, including the incarcerated life... this class has stripped me of all my former notions about people in prison and all of the stereotypes and fears I used to have. Furthermore, I have met some really amazing women at [the prison], all of which have so much potential to excel in the world. -Nermine

At the end of the course another university student wrote in his last paper:

This course opened up to me an entirely different reality, one that differs greatly from my own. And yet, the actual women in this world don't differ all that much in their thoughts and feelings. Despite that our life circumstances and life experiences are vastly different for this brief moment in time we were connected, inside out. It's a surreal experience!!!! - Sara

Breaking stereotypes

Although the university students were a self-selected group made up mostly of seniors majoring in psychology or women's studies, they came into the course with some trepidation and stereotypes.

... I was nervous when we were all standing outside waiting to come in, then something happened with the identification badges and that really got my adrenalin pumping. Then I said to myself that I need to calm down because if there was a serious threat in there, then they wouldn't let us have class in there, but since we do have class every Monday ... it can not be that bad. When I walked in I honestly expected to see very angry, mean looking women, but I walked in and they looked like "regular" women that I could know. Some of them looked like people that I knew from home... They were all very welcoming and after I got up to speak into the microphone because I was not there the other weeks, when I sat down, the ladies near me were very nice, asked questions, and were very interested in what I was doing in school. That made me feel so welcome, because we are invading their territory, but the only difference is that we can leave whenever we want, and they can not.

...All week long I have been anticipating this class and actually wanting Monday to get here sooner... In one of my dreams, it was about the (imprisoned) women and it made me so sad that they could not leave and my heart just cries out for them.

...I ...like breaking into small groups because that way eventually we will all know something small about each of the ... women and they will learn something about each of the Temple students... we will all make a bond with each other that can never be broken. – Britt

Seeing myself in another:

I instruct all the women to sit in a circle and to intersperse themselves. The circle is an old teacher's attempt to create an illusion of equality and the interspersing of students from inside and outside is another attempt to break through the differences. The visual differences are still striking, however. The women from the inside are dressed in prison garb of white t-shirts, baggy blue pants and blue over shirts. The students from the outside are forbidden to wear clothing that could make them be mistaken for inmates--no white t-shirts, no blue over shirts. Nonetheless the 30 women find ways to see their similarities and to find themselves in one another.

Matty is the youngest of the [imprisoned] women in our class. From the time that I told her that I was the youngest person in the class we automatically bonded... I look at Matty and I see myself. I come from a very large family and I sit here and ask myself what would I do if my family has to depend on me to make a living for them. I am young in school just like Matty is and I know that at anytime, one mistake and I can be sitting on the other side of those [prison] doors. -Chanae

After a class exercise in which each woman write about a time and place where she felt safe or respected and another where she felt unsafe or disrespected, a student wrote:

I will be honest and say that before I took this class, I assumed that the Temple students and the majority of the [imprisoned] women would have little in common. But this exercise showed me that many of us feel safe for the same reasons and many of us feel disrespected for the same reasons. When we started our discussion, all four of us looked a little apprehensive in sharing our deep thoughts. The fact that a lot of these PICC women are rather shy revealed to me yet another prejudice that we on the outside hold. We sometimes carry the view that everyone in prisons will be loud, abrasive, violent, etc. Not so. The fact that these women on the inside are nervous and shy and scared just proves that they are no different from anyone living on the outside. -Nermine

As with other life-changing events, the university students develop a new perspective on their own lives. The daily traffic jam, the threat of rain and the pending exam recede into the background as women in the prison bring to class a poem, a drawing, a story of their

child or their own childhood. Similarly, the benefits the university students take for granted come to the foreground.

...[a] conversation [with a woman on the inside] made me realize that I take my parents, family, and friends for granted. This class has truly made me open my eyes and realize that my petty problems are nothing compared to other people and that I should not be so selfish... I have learned so many things that I will always keep with me. -Brittⁱⁱⁱ

As with any testimonial about becoming “a new person,” we can wonder how long the change will last. I hope for durable changes, of course, but am content with the simple fact that something has happened, something has been experienced. John Dewey expressed faith in change, no matter how small when he wrote, “One shares in what another has thought or felt and in so far, meagerly or amply, has his own attitude modified.”^{iv}

An Ambivalent Postscript and Personal Questions

Without denying any of the positive tones and experiences I have described I want to add an ambivalent note about some questions I carry to and from my personal experiences in the prison.

- The fact that women are incarcerated gives all of us—the women on the inside and those of us on the outside an opportunity to learn. I wonder if I or my students are exploiting the captivity of the women on the inside by taking this “opportunity.”
- The words of the women on the inside are protected by the prison officials—I not only return their papers to them but also do not quote from them. I wonder whom the protection serves, the women or the system.

References (to be added to)

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ⁱⁱ Special thanks to the students from the "inside" and the "outside" who chose to take the course and the offices and staff of the Philadelphia Prison system who permitted it to take place inside a prison.

ⁱⁱⁱ The quotations and selections from student papers are from the university students only. This reflects my promise to the prison officials that I would not make use of the papers written by women on the inside. This agreement might have been arranged to protect the prison officials and staff or to protect the women who were incarcerated or both. In any case, I did not "use" the papers written by the students who were incarcerated; I returned to the women all copies of their work.

^{iv} Middle Works 9, 8-9 Quoted in Jonathan Pitts, "What Community?": A Service-Learning Writing Curriculum on the Edges of a Reservation. In REFLECTIONS On Community Based Writing Instruction Vol 1 No. 3, Winter 2000/2001 pp. 7-13