

# Human Connection is Contraband. So How do we do Education?

Kaia Stern

After 25 years of going in and out of jails and prisons across our nation, I still tremble as I witness how punishment dehumanizes everyone—the keepers and the kept.

Anyone who has spent time in a jail or prison knows that human connection is contraband. We do not say this aloud. It is not written in any policies or protocol. It is simply understood. Sharing is punished as extortion. Officers get fired for smiling too much. Forbidden, yet inevitable, human connection is a smuggled good.

It makes sense—punishment is about disconnection. And we, people in the United States, imagine justice to be punishment. We punish as redress for harm done and understand the punishment as justice. We banish people from their communities, separate loved ones, and isolate people in cells.

The unspoken logic of punishment pivots on the notion that some people are ontologically Other (Other in their very being). This Othering casually sanctions violence (perhaps the ultimate form of disconnection) – isolation in cells for 23.5 hours a day, being stripped and shackled to a table when under emotional distress, or despite federal law, while giving birth to a child. Oftentimes, state departments of “correction” use the language of “undue familiarity” to demarcate what behavior is prohibited and what kind of relations are allowed between people who are incarcerated and volunteers/employees. Given various vulnerabilities, power dynamics, and safety concerns, it is critical to maintain boundaries in a prison setting. However, the nature of those boundaries can and should reflect different values than they do at present.

So, if human connection is contraband, how do we do education?

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## Human Connection is Contraband. So How do we do Education?

As educators who teach in prisons, we feel the tension. We know that connection is essential to cultivating a healthy learning community. And we know that the students in our classes are treated, in the name of public safety, in profoundly dehumanizing ways.

In practical ways, we prepare. We plan to be inspected and metal-detected. We display the underside of our tongues, show our waistbands, expose our heels – all the time knowing that we will leave in a matter of hours and our students endure far more injurious dignity and physical violations. And yet there is no way to prepare for the cognitive dissonance of moving through a paramilitary structure that treats people as “property of the state” to a prison classroom where we value people for their questions and thoughts.

We traverse checkpoints and then cross a threshold into the prison classroom—a sacred and liminal space. It is a territory that is both precious and treacherous for the students and the teacher. We know that we are participating in something that is, on some level, forbidden. One small misstep and an entire program can be decimated. In an environment where people are counted as numbers, where imprisonment is the punishment, our presence as educators who value human connection is destabilizing.

If our role as educators is, in part, to help people connect to their own and each other’s ideas, to history, science, and broader viewpoints about the world, how do we embody and nurture human connection in environments constructed to dehumanize? How, in the face of routinized trauma, should the field of higher education in prison cultivate healthy human connection in ways that are not prohibited?

We slow down.

We pause. And we keep doing that.

We reckon with painful truths and become much more intentional about how we navigate human connection in carceral spaces. We also name what is at stake as a result of our presence as educators inside structures of state punishment. This process of naming and reckoning is how we maintain integrity in the face of corruption and oppression.

We attend to deep and abiding trauma that is institutional and intergenerational. We invest in trauma-informed training/pedagogy in carceral settings. We pay attention to the container (I call it a sacred space) of classroom ritual. We make room for appreciation, gratitude and grace. We deliberately create a beginning, middle, and ending. For example, I end class five minutes before the prison loudspeaker interrupts, so students have time to assimilate the material before they are rushed to return to their cell blocks. A container that is mindful of time (both actual and decontextualized) for the duration of class validates each student’s presence, allows for sustained connection, and holds them responsibly through the experience of being in a learning environment. The classroom is a sanctified space

to me because it cultivates healthy human relationships, validates each student's existence, and affirms their right to connect to themselves and others in meaningful ways.

In such a classroom, I do not mean to imply that there will always be (or should be) agreement or harmony. I mean that we do all that we can not to harm each other. We respect each other and co-create a space that is as safe, brave, and open as can be. I believe that rigorous education asks us to be uncomfortable—to listen to what we do not understand, to interrogate our assumptions, and to change our minds. In places of immense privilege, like Harvard University where I also teach, students often confuse discomfort with being in danger and weaponize language to reassert their power. Students in prison are more likely to not only be uncomfortable but also to be unsafe. Perhaps they are not getting proper medical care. Nevertheless, they show up. They are barred from gathering, and still, despite all odds, they collaborate.

To tell the truth, that human connection is contraband, and to act in favor of connection, is to affirm one of our deepest held values: people who are condemned to prison are human beings and should be recognized as such. It is common to believe that when someone transgresses criminal law, their humanity comes into question. In another work, I explore the ways traditional Protestant ideas about who is human and who is evil oxygenate our punishment system (Stern, 2014). Of course, “plantation capitalism” (Lawson, 2013, 0:16) has regulated who is considered human in the first place.

No matter how despised they may be, despite untold injustices that cause incarceration, they are human. Regardless of the crime/sin they may have committed, they are to be treated as people/kin/equals who deserve dignity and are worthy of human rights.

### References

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