In Search of Uncertainty in Prison Higher Education

Erin L. Castro, Mary R. Gould

Our initial conversations about a volume dedicated to pedagogy in prison higher education were rooted in a desire for complexity and unfinishedness. Saturated with savior narratives and nods to transformation, we craved – and still do – references to the untidy and layered ways failure orchestrates the prison classroom. Up against reigning narratives of success and increased pressure to demonstrate return-on-investment, we urged authors to turn away from dogmatic ideas of education-as-rehabilitation and instead tune-into questions of uncertainty and impossibility (Ellsworth, 1996), and to share moments of ambiguity and stuckness (Lather, 1998). We wanted authors to share what happens in the aftermath of when things do not go according to plan and to learn what it is that educators and students do. Instead of focusing on how transformational prison higher education is or can be, we wanted to unpack emergent possibilities of failures and ruptures, or explore what Pillow and Family (2015) refer to as a pedagogy of pain.

To be certain, all classrooms are political and sites of cultural and social struggle. But social relations of knowing are amplified in the prison classroom where rhetorics of “success” and “empowerment” literally undergird the possibility and desire of such spaces. Yes, individuals on all sides of the teaching/learning matrix in any classroom can be changed by the experience, but the prison classroom naturally lends itself to a higher stakes scenario, especially in relationship to power imbalances and unjust structures of the system. As we approached this volume and the Call for Submissions, we were curious about the lingering questions of success and failure in prison higher education – the very questions upon which rich discussions of pedagogy occur. What about the discomfort in prison classrooms, or skepticism and unease? Where is the unfinishedness and examples of failure? The absence of these conversations is perhaps one consequence of participating in an educational enterprise so tightly bound to desires for transformation and rehabilitation. That is, the risks of engaging in a pedagogy of uncertainty are too high given the fraught nature of higher education during incarceration and the very real ways that it can disappear. In a field that is so precariously positioned at the mercy of budget cuts, fundraising campaigns, and federal policy, the risks to deepening prison higher education pedagogy are shadowed – and in many instances, rightly so – by the very real threat of a disappearing prison classroom.
We recognize that we are writing this introduction in the context of a potentially significant moment for the field of higher education in prison, and certainly one where the future is unknown. In this context, there is an additional feeling of fragility, but also a sense of urgency. It is in this moment that we believe that the conversation we have invited is relevant and necessary.

We know that impactful experiences happen in prison higher education and that students and educators alike share moments of growth and transformation. We also know that all classroom experiences are “situated” and do not exist beyond the social, cultural, and historical context of their surroundings (Lather & Ellsworth, 1996). At the same time, there are universal narratives that animate the field of higher education in prison. I (Erin) was just asked last week why non-incarcerated faculty on campus experience the most satisfying teaching experiences of their career with incarcerated students. It’s not that this statement is untrue – but this reality is only made possible because of the deprivation of incarceration and the violence of denying people access to the most basic aspects of humanity. Is it fair to congratulate ourselves on a job well done when even arriving with the smallest unit of access to education (for example, a pen and piece of paper) might earn us the gratitude of a person who has been deprived of these simple resources? Or when even showing up receives praise? Are we at a place where we can talk about this ... situation?

Three months after the launch of the Call for Submission for Volume Two, we learned about the death of bell hooks. Insisting that the classroom does not exist in a vacuum but instead within “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy,” hooks (2003) shows us an urgency to engage conversations of failure and impossibility in prison higher education (p. 17). In Teaching to transgress (1994), for example, hooks bring to the forefront the role of authority and domination in the classroom and asks us to focus on the transformation of education. Juxtapose her call for the transformation of the classroom with the dominant narrative of the transformation of the student in prison higher education, which is often the focus of prison programs and instructors, departments of corrections, and oftentimes, out of necessity, students.

As we reflect on hooks’ imperative to situate the classroom within the discourse of impossibility, we acknowledge our own initial discomfort with the

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framing of this volume. Would the call be too limiting? Could there be risks associated with challenging narratives of transformation? Were the stakes too high to talk about failure? While we express concern, we are also inspired by the imperative to get comfortable with discomfort, in what Ellsworth calls the “impossibility of teaching” so we can “learn from and produce ruptures, failures, breaks and refusals” (1998, as cited in Lather, 2001, p. 189). We envision that by opening up a space for this conversation, and ones like it, that can be added to the prevailing narratives of success and transformation – not as an antidote or counterbalance, but as a way to add fullness and create space for the richness of experiences in the practice of teaching and learning. We offer this volume as an effort in the exploration of failure, disruption, and impossibility in the prison classroom. At the same time, we acknowledge the limitations of our efforts. Simply abandoning narratives of success and transformation is not possible, nor should it be expected, as change is always at the core of all intellectual pursuits.

Overview of Contributions

The articles and essays in this volume continue the efforts of the inaugural volume of the Journal of Higher Education in Prison (JHEP): to create space for an emerging intellectual community and to publish work that is representative of the challenges and limitations of teaching and learning within prisons. The Call for Submissions for Volume Two of JHEP was publicized in March 2021, and the second volume is publishing three types of essays: Contemporary Perspectives, Keynote Address (from the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison), and Articles. For Volume Two, we invited narratives of “fracture, unknowing, discomfort, and failure” and we specifically hoped to challenge “neat”, and often prevailing, narratives of success and transformation. We specifically named the following underrepresented topics in the Call for Submissions: abolition, accommodations, censorship, failure, identity, saviorism, trauma, technology, white supremacy, and/or other urgencies. Additionally, JHEP continued to invite these submissions in alternative formats/genres (e.g., creative nonfiction, dialogical exchanges, visual imagery, poetry, etc.) to increase the publishing opportunities for potential contributors. Volume Two begins with an edited transcript of the Keynote Address presented at the 2021 National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (Virtual Addendum). Following the Keynote Address is a series of Contemporary Perspective Essays, and the volume closes with full-length Articles. In what follows, we briefly introduce each of the submissions included in Volume Two of the Journal of Higher Education in Prison.

Keynote Address: National Conference on Higher Education in Prison

We are pleased to introduce a new section to the Journal of Higher Education in Prison, and hope that it is one that continues into future volumes,
focused on Keynote presentations at the National Conference on Higher Education in Prison (NCHEP). The inaugural publication in this section is titled “A Conversation on Abolition and Pedagogy” and presents an edited version of a dialogue between Priya Kandaswamy and Erica R. Meiners, members of Critical Resistance and higher education in prison practitioners, respectively. The conversation between Kandaswamy and Meiners was part of a virtual addendum to the 2021 in-person NCHEP, and centered on the integration of abolition into teaching and learning. Kandaswamy and Meiners engaged the audience through personal stories of how they both came to abolition work, introduced several basic tenants of abolition, a brief history of abolitionist organizing, how they both envision a reclaiming of a feminist politic and practice, and most significantly, how abolition is not just a means of analysis but also a practice for educators, students, and allies in the higher education in prison community (and beyond).

**Contemporary Perspectives**

This section of Volume Two opens with an essay by Tripfinity Taylor titled “Culturalchemy”, where the author draws upon their years of experience with both higher education and incarceration while describing the challenges and opportunities inherent in trying to gain access to education while incarcerated. Taylor identifies “culture change” as “[T]he first step to improve higher education potential in prison” and, as the title suggests, a sort of “alchemy” might be required to accomplish this goal. While this “culturalchemy” is not common, Taylor has seen for himself the “perfect storm of people and opportunities” that brought access to higher education in prison to the Idaho prison where he is currently incarcerated. Through the collaboration of the Department of Corrections and the Inside-Out program that came to the prison in 2018, Taylor experienced the collaboration that he argues is critical for the success of postsecondary programs in prison.

In “Food for thought” author Carileigh Jones explores censorship as a “defining factor of imprisonment” and as “characterize[ing] the everyday life of incarcerated individuals”. Jones continues to expand upon a body of literature that rejects “recidivism” as the necessary outcome (or gold standard) of education in prison, and instead argues for a logic that challenges the amplification of “ideological frameworks ‘that privilege Euro-American values and customs’ (Chavez-Garcia, 2015). Book bans significantly diminish the ability of programs, instructors, and students to engage in activities and ideas that potentially bring attention to systemic exclusion and injustice. For these reasons, Jones concludes, it is critical that higher education in prison programs are not complicit in book bans and uses the Education Justice Project and Illinois Collaborative on Higher Education in Prison as a model for what this type of pushback could look like in the disciplinary space of the prison.

In the essay titled “Theorizing critical carceral pedagogies”, Shawn R. Coon presents an opportunity to question and rethink the use of some aspects of
critical theory in the higher education prison classroom. Explicitly focused on Paulo Freire’s (1970) concept of “conscientization”, or the effort to increase the critical consciousness of students, Coon asks readers to consider the question: “Can there be conscientization in the prison classroom that isn’t driven by a desire to emancipate?”. Placing the student at the center of pedagogy, Coon argues that encouraging students to critique a system that is actively causing them harm could have material consequences and are often beyond the knowledge of the instructor. In particular, Coon questions the utility of “conscientization” and “whether the coercive nature of a prison undermines attempts at anti-oppressive education”. Coon poses that these strategies might be more effective on the outside campus (or other learning environments outside of the prison space) as a means of expanding anti-oppression goals to a broader audience.

The final essay in this section “What are the possibilities and limitations of teaching and learning in prison spaces?” by Matthew Anderson details the ways that in-prison education programs can “ride the wave of digital learning opportunities generated in the wake of the COVID-19”. Anderson, drawing on their firsthand experience “riding the wave” of access and exclusion from education in prison, names the many possibilities that emerged during the uncertain and traumatic experience of the global pandemic. While not presenting a flawless case for implementation, Anderson contends that the “trial and error” methods begun during the early phase of the pandemic should continue to guide the philosophy of many Departments of Corrections across the country. The drive for greater access to technology for people who are incarcerated starts with the willingness to understand technology as critical to quality education. Anderson concludes the essay with a sentiment likely shared by many: that the possibilities outweigh the limitations and shares ideas about how policies and practices might be modified to accomplish the best outcomes for students.

The four articles published in Volume Two offer a range of visions for postsecondary education inside prisons. Each poses challenges to the many assumptions of teaching and learning that are born out of a racist education system that divides students into groups deemed to be “deserving of quality”, or groups deemed “deserving of better than nothing” educational opportunities. A thread moving through each of the pieces is that the philosophies of “good enough” or “better than nothing” are born of an infrastructure of injustice and inequality that undergirds some practices of teaching and learning in prison that must be eradicated.

**Articles**

This section opens with the article “‘Read this and don’t get caught’: Cellblock intellectuals and the transformation of prison education”, where authors Martin Leyva and Christopher Bickel situate their work within the theoretical traditions of convict criminology and abolitionist criminology and introduce readers
to the often-underappreciated network of informal education that is a pillar of intellectual life within prisons across the country. While there is far less attention paid to the role of “cellblock intellectuals” in the literature on prison education, Leyva and Bickel deftly highlight the critical role these teachers and mentors play in learning within prisons. Decentering the classroom as the singular space of teaching and learning, this essay, drawing from interviews with formerly incarcerated students and the lived experiences of the authors, argues that “prison intellectuals provide a blueprint for prison education programs” that can transform the “unjust conditions” that characterize in-prison pedagogy, and highlight the role of “informal education” for people who are currently incarcerated. Finally, the article advocates for the recognition of “Cellblock Intellectuals” as educators, creating counter-narratives that “situate incarcerated people within a long history of transformative struggle against oppression”.

Author Rachel Oppenheim, in the essay titled “The carceral classroom as a site of multiple fantasies” explores the many fantasies circulating within an education program in a women-designated jail. By applying a critical theoretical framework the author argues that the fantasies “of both empowerment and redemption work” held by educators, students and program and prison administrators, can potentially “obscure structural injustices, placing the onus of rehabilitation on incarcerated people and discounting their desires and needs”. Oppenheim specifically focuses on the ideas and expectations of the non-incarcerated volunteer instructors and argues that their fantasies of education must be rigorously interrogated, less they risk reinforcing the same coercive and repressive practices of the criminal-legal system.

In the essay titled “A symphony of solidarity: Abolitionist pedagogies and the beloved community”, author Johari Jabir interrogates the embedded nature of language and its limits in the carceral logic, which he contends is an opportunity. Replacing the language of “alienation” with that of “solidarity” allows for an expanded liberatory vision for higher education in prison programs and practitioners. Through examples from their own teaching, the author illustrates how carceral logics limit the liberatory vision of higher education in prison. Jabir explores the potential of abolitionist pedagogy to confront “the limits of language embedded in carceral logics” and as a result “reclaim … incarcerated students … as members of the Beloved Community”. Deeply rooted in an abolitionist framework, the article takes to task carceral logics that permeate all aspects of modern society, ultimately determining which lives, experiences and bodies are “disposable” – within the context of a history of white settler colonialism. The author holds the space for the prison classroom to remain a place of possibility, and solidarity, where the practice of abolitionist pedagogy can cultivate and recognize a “radical each-otherness”.

In the final essay in this section, titled “Prison pedagogies of place: Leveraging space, time, and institutional knowledge in higher education in prison teaching”, author Logan Middleton presents a case for greater attention to “place”
and “space” in the context of higher education in prison pedagogy. By tracing “how incarcerated students leverage their spatial, temporal, and experiential knowledges” Middleton illuminates how the classroom can become a more innovative and collaborative space for students and educators, specifically, because of the ingenuity and creativity that students who are incarcerated bring to teaching and learning. At the same time, Middleton remains acutely aware of and accounts for the barriers and challenges that are inherent in the prison setting, a site of extreme dehumanization and isolation. It is for these reasons that an analysis of space and place and the material structures (and bureaucracies), Middleton argues, is critical in theorizing higher education in prison pedagogy.

Limitations and What’s Next

At the conclusion of Volume One of JHEP we named ‘the lived reality of inequality’ as the foremost limitation of managing a journal that exists at the intersection of higher education and prison. As we reflect on the completion of Volume Two, it is this same limitation that we are again confronted with. The scholars we are most intent on reaching and collaborating with, those inside prisons, continue to lack access to the basic resources needed to fully engage in a scholarly community: access to research materials, consistent opportunities to produce material and receive feedback, and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues. Volume Two contains two Contemporary Perspective Essays from authors who are currently incarcerated and there is not a currently incarcerated scholar who is an author or co-author of a full-length article. This volume is publishing the work of three current graduate students, two currently incarcerated (solo) authors and two authors who are formerly incarcerated.

We continue to invite the higher education in prison community to be part of this project, and there are many ways to do so. First, we encourage anyone working with people who are currently incarcerated (i.e., teachers, tutors, program directors, etc.) to request copies of JHEP to distribute or to share the “Request a Volume” form that is located on the journal’s website. We invite all readers to submit a manuscript for review and to share the Call for Submissions with anyone in your community who is interested in lending their experience and expertise to this field. We are investing in working in community with the vast network of scholars and intellectuals inside U.S. prisons and we hope that all readers will be part of the effort to ensure they have the opportunity to contribute to this project.

To get involved, review manuscripts or request printed volumes of the journal for your students, contact us at jhep@higheredinprison.org. Print versions of the NCHEP Keynote Address and individual Contemporary Perspective essays or Articles are available for download on the JHEP website (https://www.higheredinprison.org/journal-of-higher-education-in-prison). This is also the location where Calls for Submissions are posted.
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References


