Theorizing Critical Carceral Pedagogies: Teaching Toward the Purposes of Higher Education in and Against Prison

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The prison classroom is an increasingly popular site of political contestation and pedagogical exploration (Castro & Brawn, 2017; Lewen, 2013; Scott, 2013; 2014). Critically-oriented teachers and students might see the prison classroom as a specific site of political struggle in an age of mass confinement (Scott, 2013; 2014). Yet, other engagements are different. Some prison-university partnerships go so far as to provide on-campus students with college credit for traveling into a prison to have class alongside incarcerated people, who attend the same class but do not earn credit – thus potentially creating a form of academic tourism (Castro & Gould, 2019). A number of educators who work in and with prisons continue to discuss issues of power and pedagogy in the context of the carceral state (e.g., Castro & Gould, 2019; Ginsburg, 2014; Kilgore, 2011; Stern, 2014). These scholars specifically draw attention to what extent critical, anti-oppressive, feminist, anti-racist and related pedagogies can fully take root in the prison classroom (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Kumashiro, 2000; Luke, et al., 1992). In this essay, I argue that educators who are committed to critical pedagogy should look to other sites outside the prison classroom where they can teach against the logics of prisons.

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Acknowledgements: A special thanks to Dr. Erin Castro and the Utah Prison Education Project for all their help with this paper.
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The Predicaments of Critical Pedagogy in the Higher Education Prison Classroom

As a teaching praxis, critical pedagogy refers to a broad range of educational philosophies that seek to make visible dynamics of power and oppression throughout society (Freire, 1970). The practice of teaching and learning is not passive or one-dimensional within critical pedagogy. Rather, critical pedagogy proposes that education is always a site of transformation and holds the possibility to both humanize and dehumanize. To address the problems associated with “traditional” pedagogies, Freire (1970) desired to increase students’ critical consciousness, or conscientization. To cultivate conscientization or critical consciousness, critical pedagogues practice problem-posing education (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008; Wink, 2005). Problem-posing education draws from the lived experiences of students and invites them to acknowledge and question their circumstances in the world. The traditional aims of critical pedagogy, regardless of the specific context in which they are engaged, are not without criticism (e.g., Ellsworth, 1989; Lather, 1998; Luke & Gore, 1992). Feminist-poststructuralist scholars such as Lather (1998) and Ellsworth (1989), take issue with the universalizing nature of critical pedagogy and specifically, the drive for empowerment of the Other.

In her work on what she describes as a pedagogy of “stuckness,” Lather (1998) criticizes the certainty within critical pedagogy to support students in accurately reading and writing the world (p. 493). In the prison classroom, the drive to emancipate is further complicated by the coercion and violent nature of prisons. One question to consider is the following: Can there be conscientization in the prison classroom that isn’t driven by a desire to emancipate? The answer is certainly yes, but it is a delicate and complicated one given the unique power dynamics of the prison classroom, mainly the informational void faced by incarcerated students in their learning and development (Castro & Brawn, 2017). If educators are not engaging critical pedagogy in other educational sites and classrooms, then doing so in the prison classroom – for the specific purpose of emancipation – feeds into the stereotypes and biases about incarcerated people, and specifically that they are in need of a kind of liberation that higher education can provide.

The utilization of problem-posing methods also becomes troublesome within the prison classroom. Part of what makes problem-posing education meaningful is that it is context-specific and therefore looks different across educational sites. The topics that students and instructors explore together vary, but the process is largely the same: identify the problem, reflect, and act (Wink, 2005). While many topics could be part of a problem-position lesson in a prison classroom, problem-posing about incarceration inside a prison has the potential to cause harm to students. This is not a metaphorical sense of harm. Students in prison can suffer harm for violation of rules, regulations, standards, and norms in
prison – the very structures that problem-posing education may encourage students to critique (Thomas, 1995). For example, a critical educator may be tempted to encourage political action on the part of students. Yet, some forms of political action can have enormous consequences for incarcerated students (Scott, 2013; 2014). The consequences for students in prison have the potential to be more severe than those in traditional settings, and may result in further oppression. The room for the equal creation of knowledge becomes slim when within the context of these oppressive institutions.

**Theorizing a Critical Carceral Pedagogy in and Against Prisons**

Despite the challenges associated with critical pedagogy in prison classrooms, there are numerous and urgent reasons to continue engaging anti-oppressive teaching and learning in carceral spaces with imprisoned students – as well as non-carceral spaces. In her work describing the Education Justice Project (EJP), Ginsburg (2014) provides insight into the dimensions of anti-oppressive teaching and learning in the prison classroom that is driven by incarcerated students. The EJP has demonstrated that thoughtful educational programming in prisons can create community and a level of civic engagement (Ginsburg, 2014). While Ginsburg does not refer to EJP as a product of critical pedagogy, I see the emergence and sustainability of this program as broadly embodying the spirit of anti-oppressive education, and a realistic example for future possibilities.

One central theme amongst many college in prison programs is that prisons and society are inexorably linked. However, it remains a tragic reality that utilizing critical pedagogies in prison classrooms can only challenge systemic oppression to a limited extent. The development of a critical consciousness will not remove a student in prison from their current oppression. A skilled educator can help to emancipate minds, but bodies remain confined. Political action against prisons cannot happen from one site of political contestation: it must happen from multiple sights. Many higher education in prison programs are worthy endeavors that provide and address the vital need for education in the prison setting (Alliance for Higher Education in Prison, 2017). Higher education in prison programs alone cannot address issues of mass incarceration, surveillance, and the proliferation of carceral logics. The carceral archipelago is too vast and disconnected. One of the greatest opportunities for the work of critical pedagogy in the carceral state can be found in spaces outside of the physical prison. Part of what makes incarceration so powerful in the U.S. is its virtual invisibility for many privileged communities.

I propose that critical educators who want to address problems associated with incarceration look for sites of educational opportunity where conversations about prisonization are not currently taking place. If meaningful change is expected, then a more integrated critical educational framework is needed. It is important to remember that we are all stakeholders in the carceral state. If true emancipation from
carceral oppression is the ultimate goal, then it will take more than just the efforts of those who are currently incarcerated. Alone, the students in prison lack the resources and legal means that are necessary to develop and sustain political action. Thus, non-incarcerated educators have a responsibility to engage the public, and students outside prisons, about carceral oppression. As Castro and Brawn (2017) state: “We are ultimately not changing the space unless we take part in changing the machinery that produces the contemporary prison classroom” (p. 118).

References


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Journal of Higher Education in Prison


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