

**PRACTITIONER PAPER**

## **Breaking down barriers: Review of the implementation of an Inside/Out prison exchange program in a jail setting**

by TANJA C. LINK  
Kennesaw State University

**Abstract:** *The traditional criminal justice curriculum typically covers the three c's – cops, courts, and corrections. In addition, students can usually choose from a variety of discipline-related special topics courses to satisfy the requirements of their major or minor in criminal justice. However, what is missing from most curricula for future criminal justice professionals is face-to-face interaction with the very individuals they will spend a good part of their careers with – those who have been accused of or sentenced for law-breaking behaviors. The current paper describes the planning and implementation of an Inside Out Prison Exchange Course in a jail setting and offers an analysis of students' course evaluation to discuss the benefits of this educational experience. The results are intended to highlight the importance and benefit of non-traditional educational experiences for better criminal justice professionals and creating opportunities for viable reentry.*

**Key words:** *Inside-Out; Education; Criminal Justice; reentry*

“We need to be prepared to return to the outside world and stay there. But have hope for us when we're inside, too. We need opportunities to educate ourselves. My mother used to tell me something that obviously took me a long time to figure out: ‘How you think is how you act.’” John J. Lennon (2015)

### **Introduction**

The core of the traditional American criminal justice curriculum typically covers the three c's – cops, courts, and corrections. In addition, depending on the course offerings of the particular college or university, students can usually choose from a variety of discipline-related special topics courses to satisfy the requirements of their major or minor in criminal justice. However, what is missing from most curricula for future criminal justice professionals is face-to-face interaction with the very individuals they will spend a good part of their careers with – those who have been accused of or sentenced for law-breaking behaviors. Over the past decade, a teaching model called the Inside Out Prison Exchange has developed into a nationwide network with hundreds of courses in many correctional facilities and institutions of higher education as well as multiple trainings a year for interested instructors.

### **What is Inside Out?**

The Inside Out Prison Exchange Program<sup>1</sup> provides the opportunity for college students and incarcerated women and men to learn together as peers. Through interactive course sessions, including small and large group discussions and activities, students are given the chance to break down traditional in-group/out-group barriers that are anchored in many of our cultural beliefs regarding those who – for however long or whatever reason - reside on the inside. Most importantly, the course allows students to examine their life experiences in a different context and thus grow as individuals and scholars.

The overarching objective of courses taught in this model is to create a transformational education experience, both for students and instructors (see Boyd, 2013; Boyd & Myers, 1988; McLaren, 2015) that can-

<sup>1</sup> Detailed information can be found at <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>



not be accomplished in a traditional university classroom. With an emphasis on collaboration and dialogue, 'experts' on both sides of the law learn with and from each other about pressing issues in criminal justice, and are thereby set in motion processes of social change and professional growth.<sup>2</sup>

Our specific Inside Out course was entitled "Myths and Realities of Crime and Criminal Justice." The stated objectives of the course included providing an opportunity to break down barriers between the outside and the inside, to educate both inside and outside students on important criminal justice issues, and to learn about the causes of criminal behavior, the criminal justice system and process, as well as requisites for career choices. For the inside students, it was also our goal to provide an opportunity to experience a college environment: to consider college as a realistic option after release, to experience support and acceptance from the community. Finally, we hoped individuals would gain a better understanding of their own choices and the criminal justice system that was not completely tainted by their personal negative experience.

### **Why Inside Out?**

Criminal justice majors are pursuing their education to become professionals in the fields of law enforcement, corrections, and probation, as prosecutors, attorneys, or judges, to name but a few areas of expertise suited for graduates in this degree. Research consistently reveals that law enforcement is the top career aspiration among over half of all criminal justice majors (Johnson & White, 2002; Kelley, 2004; Krimmel & Tartaro, 1999). Tontodonato (2006) found that 51% of criminal justice majors in the sample planned a career in the criminal justice system, and 15% expected to go to law school. In their professional capacity, criminal justice majors will interact with individuals who break the law, are on trial, on probation, on parole, or incarcerated for their involvement in criminal behavior. Except during some internships, most of our conventional college students never get a chance to interact extensively with the population to which they plan to devote their professional careers. The Inside Out experience thus offers a unique opportunity for future criminal justice professionals to familiarize themselves with the "other," and to learn through first-hand experiences and interactions the many ways in which criminal justice can be improved for both sides. In a review of her own Inside Out course, McLaren (2015: 372) found, "Students typically move from an 'us versus them' [...] orientations to a strong sense of community and appreciation for each other."

Benefits are not limited to the outside students though. The population currently incarcerated in the United States surpassed 2.2 million in 2013 (Glaze & Kaeble, 2014) and the large majority will be back in the community after having served their sentence. Research is very clear that in order for reentry to be viable for incarcerated individuals, more attention to several factors is warranted. Meaningful educational experiences, for example, have a powerful positive impact on the individual, including a marked increase in self-confidence, a transformation in the way the self is seen, a feeling of belonging, and the likelihood of becoming gainfully employed and staying out of trouble with the law (Torres & Fine, 2005). Participation in prison college courses has been linked to the development of personal agency and a sense of responsibility (Torres & Fine, 2005). The Inside Out model reaches beyond the traditional prison college course by actively involving members of the community the individuals will return to, which in our experience has contributed to an increase in mutual understanding and respect between individuals who otherwise would have likely never interacted outside their clearly defined roles (i.e., law enforcement/corrections and offenders/incarcerated).

In addition, employment has been determined to be a reliable predictor of reentry success (e.g., Lockwood et al., 2012). In order for the typically under-educated and often formally unskilled incarcerated individuals to find and maintain employment in a very competitive market in the community to which they return, many barriers must be overcome. Reentering individuals face social stigma as well as discrimination from potential employers (e.g., Fletcher, 2001; Petersilia, 2003; Rose, Clear, & Ryder, 2000). The effects of such stigma on employment and other areas essential to one's wellbeing are well publicized in the literature (e.g., Freeman, 1987; Grogger, 1992; Nagin & Waldfogel, 1993; Pager, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993; Travis, Solomon, & Waul, 2001). However, according to Hirschfield and Piquero (2010) the stigma can be mitigated by personal familiarity. Put differently, positive and constructive interactions, such as those taking place in an Inside Out course, assist in transforming negative labels and perceptions (e.g., Snyder & Reysen, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> More detailed information about the Inside Out Prison Exchange Program is available at <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>

One way to diminish the “us versus them” attitudes is to allow individuals from the inside and the outside to engage in a shared learning experiences that creates a sense of community. Inside Out offers just such an opportunity, and the Inside Out class can accomplish both – education and integration – at the same time. Not only do inside students leave the class enlightened and more critically aware, they also leave knowing that at least some people on the outside are actively involved in improving the current system of criminal justice. As an added benefit, they might receive information on job opportunities to which they would not otherwise have access. Likewise, outside students receive career-relevant education while at the same time engaging with individuals who can give first-hand accounts of the issues that can render the system inefficient and unjust, thus giving future criminal justice professionals a heightened level of insight and knowledge in the areas that so urgently need to be addressed with regard to criminal justice reform in their own community. In order for such change to take place, it is imperative to include all stakeholders in the conversation and the process, as is typical in an Inside-Out course (e.g., Pompa, 2002; Starks et al., 2011).

### **Planning and Implementation of the Course**

The Inside Out Prison Exchange model incorporates many moving parts that do not always flow easily from traditional university instructional methods. Due to the populations and stakeholders involved, in our experience pitching and introducing the idea to the decision makers at both institutions required careful planning and much patience. The process of establishing the program discussed here started with the completion of the Inside Out Instructor training in the summer of 2012. One of the first big decisions that needed to be made was with regard to whether the class should be offered at a prison or jail<sup>3</sup>. Many Inside Out courses are held in prisons, which comes with some benefits. By design, prison populations are more permanent than jail populations, and the pool of potential inside students is bigger, allowing for more careful screening and selection. In our case, the closest state prison is over an hour’s drive from campus. Given that our average student works at least part-time while taking a full class load, the time commitment of such a drive was deemed untenable. In contrast, the Sheriff’s Office and county jail is only 20 minutes from campus, and existing working relationships made the introduction of the proposal much easier. In addition, we felt the needed to keep in mind that a good number of our students aspire to work for the local law enforcement, and it made sense to make connections and establish a good working relationship for their benefit. Thanks to my colleague’s extensive and longstanding relationship with the local sheriff’s office, we secured a meeting with the chief jailer at the adult detention center to pitch the idea of Inside Out.

While our proposal was met with seemingly supportive nods, it was clear that the idea to repeatedly bring outsiders into the facility for 16 weeks to learn in one room together with insiders was very much beyond the comfort zone of the officials in charge. After some reassurance and the provision of references (i.e., from wardens and officials of other correctional institutions in Georgia where Inside Out had been taught successfully), we eventually received the go-ahead to start with the next phase; implementation. However, we were clearly on trial for the first semester and had to make some concessions to smooth the way, such as the class time for the first semester (Friday nights 7-10 p.m.), meeting location (visitation room rather than inside the jail), and the selection of the inside students (work release rather than closed population).

Because university funding for the course was not secured until the very last minute, we had little time to advertise for participants the first two times we ran the course. Students had to complete an application that included questions about their personal and academic background as well as open-ended questions to assess their understanding of crime and criminal justice. We then conducted interviews with the initially selected students and sent acceptance notifications to those we chose to participate in the course.

The inside students were handpicked by the staff of the correctional facility. Because a course like the one we proposed was initially very much beyond the comfort zone of officials at the Sheriff’s office, most of our inside students were selected from a limited pool of work release residents and inmate workers. Due to the transitional nature of the jail population, it was challenging to find enough eligible inside students who were guaranteed to remain at the facility for the duration of our course (16 weeks). In order to get the desired 15 in-

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<sup>3</sup> In the USA, the difference between jails and prisons boils down to the length of stay and purpose. Individuals are held in jails to await trial, and to serve a short sentence after conviction. They are most typically operated by local law enforcement and government agencies. Prisons, operated by state governments and the Federal Bureau of Prisons, hold individuals convicted of felonies for longer periods.

side students, we were allowed to include both female and male inside students, which was a very unique and unprecedented inside student population. The inside students were not offered college credits for the course, but they were given an incentive of good time<sup>4</sup> for each class session they attended (12 days maximum). While the desired number of students would be around 30, equally distributed among inside and outside, we experienced attrition for both groups for different reasons ranging from illness to early release, reducing the class size over the course of the semester. While challenging at times none of these events was detrimental to the overall success of the course.

### **Class structure**

True to the Inside Out model we always started class in a large circle, with inside and outside students alternating seats<sup>5</sup>. During this circle time, everyone is welcomed and has the opportunity to share something from the previous week if they wish to do so. According to Pollack (2014), these circles are one of the most powerful pedagogical tools an Inside Out class offers. To facilitate this activity in the first meeting, we told students ahead of time to closely observe their physical social environment and the news leading up to our class, in order to share something criminal justice related that was new or interesting to them. By mid-semester, students seemed to get the hang of this recurring exercise and did not need the prompts anymore. We also gave an overview of what students could expect in the session. In the first few weeks, we continued with icebreakers to decrease the palpable tension and tentativeness in the room and give students the opportunity to get to know each other beyond the label of inside and outside. In the initial large circle, we would start a discussion about the reflection assignment and segue into the topic and assigned readings. We incorporated a range of small group activities and exercises, so there was considerable movement and interaction throughout the three-hour class. Class ended again in a large circle, with final reflections and clarification on homework and reading assignments.

### **Conclusion**

Looking back at the process of implementing this course, several factors integral to Inside Out proved very significant for a positive and meaningful experience for all involved. For example, as recommended by the model, we held separate orientation meetings with each group. In addition to general introductions, the initial meeting provided an opportunity for students to ask questions and voice fears or concerns, and for us to address them. It was imperative to set and repeatedly clarify strict rules at the outset, as they differed quite substantially from a regular on-campus class and any disregard for these rules, however small it may have seemed to the individual student, could have resulted in the immediate termination of the class and program. Still we experienced violations of those rules, most of which involved the dress code and arriving late to class. As the semester progressed and students felt more at ease with being in a jail and their classmates, they also became more relaxed with regard to abiding by the rules. We were fortunate to have a very good working relationship with our liaison at the Sheriff's Office and the deputies sitting in on our meetings, so that in our case these violations did not have negative consequences for the entire class. There were, however, instances when a student was told to leave and subsequently excluded from the course.

The first meeting with the inside students was just as important. While a recap of the facility rules might seem superfluous and most of our inside student had a special status (work release) that allowed daily contact with community residents, it was nevertheless critical to provide the same information to all students to signal that all were treated as peers. An additional function of this first meeting with the inside students was to address concerns of being studied and stereotyped, as well as fears of not being able to keep up with the class due to varying levels of education.

We also learned that the very first combined meeting set the structure for much of the semester. Keeping the general organization of each session consistent produced a positive and reassuring effect on the students in that unfamiliar space. Additionally, even though we knew that students had very different educational backgrounds, we quickly saw the importance of 'meeting the students where they were' in terms of academic abilities, and of providing detailed and constructive feedback to the assignments. In order for a class to flourish

<sup>4</sup> Credit for sentence reduction

<sup>5</sup> Because we had both female and male inside students in our classes who were initially not allowed to sit together by request of the Sheriff's Office, we had to inconspicuously assign seats so that would not be an obvious issue.

ish in this setting, above all flexibility proved to be crucial, because in the end the only real control we had was over the structure and organization of our weekly lessons and discussions. However, despite the initial roadblocks to getting the course off the ground and skepticism from the correctional administration, the course received such positive feedback that we were asked back the next semester.

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**Tanja C. Link** is an Assistant Professor at Kennesaw State University. Her research and teaching focuses on vulnerable populations and reentry. She regularly teaches Inside Out courses as well as directs a Study Abroad Program for Criminal Justice Majors.