

PRACTITIONER PAPER

Service-learning, the Arts, and Incarceration

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Abstract: *This paper describes three different service-learning approaches the authors utilized when working with graduate art education students and incarcerated residents at a municipal jail facility. By situating our experiences within feminist theory, we analyze and unpack the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. Through an analysis of teacher and student journal entries we came to see that our level of responsiveness to residents needed to increase as compared to our considerations of the university students. We came to see the significant knowledge that the residents hold about excellence in teaching. This created an opportunity for the university students and ourselves to learn from the residents. We also identified three areas that created change in the university students and faculty members; breaking stereotypes, awareness of privilege, and showing empathy. We believe that service-learning in pre-service teacher preparation programs allows university students to learn from and with residents, thus helping to create more empathetic future teachers.*

Keywords: *Art education; graduate students; teacher preparation*

As intersectional feminists¹, weⁱ see entanglements among various topics related to service-learning² in settings of incarceration. Through our work with graduate students taking service-learning courses that place them in the Richmond City Justice Center (RCJC), we have implemented numerous approaches to teaching and learning. In this paper, we describe our various programs and reflect upon them. This paper is a collaboration among two faculty members and a graduate student who enrolled in three semesters of service-learning courses and volunteered for numerous workshops. Through analysis of our reflections, we note the areas of our experiences that may be transferable to others in similar situations and that may have implications for others.

Service-Learning

Service-learning pedagogy, which relates classroom learning to some form of meaningful practice beyond the classroom, is an ideal pedagogical tool for pre-service teachers. Through service-learning experiences pre-service teachers produce an increased self-awareness about their future roles as teachers and increased sense of empowerment and accomplishment with project-based learning (Chen, 2004). Haddix (2015) considers the effects of community engagement in teacher preparation programs, which help her mostly middle class and white pre-service university students realize that in addition to learning *about* culturally relevant pedagogy within the college setting, they must also apply this knowledge and resist the “savior” mentality. She asserts community engagement may help students realize the importance of listening to and honoring their students’, families’, and community’s knowledge within the school settings.

¹ In advocating for women’s rights and equality, intersectional feminists recognize the many intersecting identities of people. For instance, intersectional feminists address gender in addition to race, social class, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, religion, among other areas. Intersectional feminists recognize that women face oppression in different ways based upon their various identities.

² Service-learning is an approach to teaching that connects classroom learning to service in the community. Some of the hallmarks of service-learning include mutually agreed upon goals, working with the community, and reflection.



Our Context

Virginia Commonwealth University is a large, urban, research university recognized by the Carnegie Foundation as one of 54 universities nationwide that is “Community Engaged” with “Very High Research Activity.” About 2.5 miles from campus is a municipal jail facility, the Richmond City Justice Center (RCJC), which incarcerates approximately 900-1,200 men and women at any given time. Several years ago, a faculty member from the English department at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) began teaching classes at the RCJC. Over time, he involved his students and this evolved into a well-established multidisciplinary university-community partnership through which dual enrollment university classes are taught at the RCJC with VCU students sitting side-by-side with the RCJC residentsⁱⁱ. This program has grown to involve faculty and students in several departments – English; Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies; Religious Studies; and Art Education. Each faculty member works with the RCJC educators to determine the format and structure of each class, and the service-learning looks very different from class to class. Generally, the university students and RCJC residents enroll in the same course and learn together. The university students earn academic credit and the RCJC residents earn continuing education credits for their work. Throughout our 18 months of involvement with the RCJC, we have utilized different class structures in response to the pre-service educators’ and RCJC residents’ requests and needs.

Service-Learning Implementation

With this paper, we will focus on the art education courses for graduate students taught by Courtnie and Melanie from the spring of 2015 through the spring of 2016. Tesni, a graduate student in the Art Education graduate pre-service program, participated in all three official courses and an unofficial summer session, as well as numerous shorter workshop sessions. As faculty members, our goal is primarily to create the best possible experiences for the university students. Within the context of the RCJC, we became aware of how the needs of the university students differ from the needs of the RCJC residents. These differences created a tension between the needs of university students, who are mostly from middle and upper socioeconomic class backgrounds, and the needs of the RCJC residents, who are primarily from lower socioeconomic class backgrounds. As professors reflecting on our choices, we can see how initially we considered the needs of the university students more than the needs of the RCJC residents. However, over time, we came to consider the needs of the residents as much or more than those of the university students. Further, within our university classes we do not have much racial, ethnic, or economic diversity and thus, before bringing university students to the RCJC we needed to engage our graduate students in conversations about race and poverty. This proved challenging in the short amount of time we had available. Building a shared understanding of interaction and respect was essential so that comments which could easily alienate or “other” the RCJC residents could be avoided.

Pedagogical Approaches

Although the approaches of the three classes varied, we grounded our theoretical approach to all classes in critical feminist pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Lather, 1991) that interrogates the imbalances of power in education, the institution, and our communities and makes more transparent the intersections of oppression and the action necessary for change. Tenets prominent in feminist pedagogy that informed our approaches include:

- 1.) Feminist pedagogy evolves from feminist social practice and is oriented toward social transformation, consciousness-raising, and social activism.
- 2.) Feminist pedagogy emphasizes the development of epistemological frameworks that stress both the subjective and communal reality of knowing. [Feminist pedagogy] asks whose interests are served by knowledge and requires “knowers” and “learners” to be accountable to the uses of knowledge.
- 3.) Feminist pedagogy addresses race, class, and gender as crucial categories for analyzing experience and institutions. It also explores the complex and frequently ignored intersections of these categories. (Cohee et al., 1998, p. 3)

In the first graduate-level art education class format that we developed, pre-service students collaborated with each other to design a 10-week visual arts course for residents at the RCJC. The graduate students took

turns teaching the incarcerated adults, so over the course of the 10-week session they participated as students alongside RCJC residents, and as teachers. The role of the university instructor in this iteration was to provide support, guidance, and a theoretical framework at the start of the semester. The framework emphasized contingency, flexibility, and reflexivity throughout the process. Like Lather (1991), we position pedagogy as the “fruitful site” (p. 15) for the situated learning that took place and the “transformation of consciousness” (Lusted, as cited in Lather, 1991, p. 15) at the intersections of teacher, student, and collaboratively produced knowledge.

Collaborative planning among the graduate students, taking into account the expressed interests of the RCJC residents, took place on VCU’s campus each week, and university students taught a weekly 2-hour class at the RCJC. As the professors, we were present at both as observers, artmakers, timekeepers, and additional support. The structure of this iteration sought to access the applied knowledge and practical experiences that university service-learning provides, to “[close] the conventional gap between textual representation and the ‘real’ world” (Williams & McKenna, 2002, p. 137). However, as faculty members, we had concerns about representation, alterity, and failure to engage with the tenets of feminist pedagogy. Our own deep focus on the graduate students’ instructional and curricular component of the course gave way to our assumptions that the “real life” experience would simply unfold without more attention to the complexity of the learning space and ways we were unknowingly reifying assumptions we sought to dispel. For instance, while giving instructions, one of the graduate students asked the RCJC residents, “You all know how to do this, right?” Setting up a situation in which people who have had few positive educational experiences have to raise their hand and say that they do not know how to do something shows a lack of awareness on the part of the graduate student. While the outcomes of the course were ultimately positive, reflection on the proceedings led us to rethink the structure of the course and what was required of the university students and RCJC residents alike. A reignited priority on experience and collaboration, of further dismantling the “otherness” in the learning space, produced a different approach.

The second approach more closely resembled a traditional classroom: the professor designed a curricular plan for the graduate students and the RCJC residents to learn together. The project, a multimedia image and sound collaboration, required time in-class at the RCJC each week and out of class for both students and residents between weekly sessions. After responding individually to the prompt “My World Was...” and writing their own stories, graduate students and RCJC residents assembled themselves into collaborative teams, rewriting their stories as one collective narrative. Access to video recording or editing equipment at the RCJC was not allowed, so the graduate students acted as “area experts” each week, capturing images and video outside of class time and consulting with the residents about where and what should be included to illustrate their story. Alternately, the residents had access to sound recording equipment at the jail and were responsible for the audio portions of the projects. Our time together at RCJC was spent in negotiation of that content and the creation of collage elements for stop-motion animation, titles, and credits. At the center of all of those elements was the collective storytelling.

The third approach was purposeful, but more fluid as compared to the first two approaches because we responded directly to the requests and articulated needs of the RCJC residents. The third approach workshops included a resident-led discussion on their schooling experiences and dialogue with graduate students; a resident-requested screening of the movie *Selma* with a discussion afterward; and a series of one-day art-making workshops intended to produce small gifts that residents could share with their families, their fellow residents, and, in some cases, the administration at the jail. The framework for this third approach is an ethic of care (Monchinski, 2010) and an awareness of the significant knowledge of the RCJC residents. Care ethicist Nel Noddings (2002) considers nurturing relationships between human beings essential to emotional wellbeing. Many of the programs offered at the RCJC have either direct or indirect outcomes of relationship building as part of the rehabilitation cycle for residents (Rockett, 2016). During these shorter workshops, opportunities to engage casually without the structure of a lesson plan or specified learning outcomes produced rich conversations about life, relationships, hopes, and possibilities. We realize this third approach is a departure from traditional service-learning practices that emphasize longer periods of interaction. However, due to the nature of the RCJC, the highly transient population, and the timing considerations that revolve around their changing meal schedule, we found these one-day workshops to be a way to work with the residents’ requests, the tim-

ing needs of the RCJC educators, and, our students' busy schedules. Further, because they were interspersed within these longer classes, there was some continuity.

One workshop focused on education, with the RCJC residents teaching the graduate students and faculty members about their own educational experiences. The largely African American population of residents at RCJC shared their beliefs about what makes a good teacher or learning experience in school, and many residents expressed their experience of not feeling cared about or being unable to relate to teachers. The teachers who made a difference in their lives showed empathy and care, and having diverse as well as empathetic teachers could foster these qualities. The RCJC residents also identified aspects of their education that were difficult or contributed to their dropping out of high school. A strength of these shorter workshops was that we were able to complete the activity or discussion with the group of residents within the allotted time in a single day. However, there were times when a longer discussion or longer work time would have been helpful.

Each of the three approaches had strengths and drawbacks with the second and third approaches more thoughtfully addressing the needs of RCJC residents and the graduate students. While the first approach afforded the graduate students an opportunity to teach, it also distanced them from the RCJC residents and put them in a position of power. Further, because the graduate students were concerned with planning and teaching, they were not always attending to the socio-cultural aspects of the learning environment. We do think the graduate students learned from this approach and benefitted from the experience. However, when reflecting upon graduate student and RCJC resident responses to the second and third approaches, we think these formats are stronger in that they assist in building empathy and relationships.

Stronger relationships developed among learners in the second approach, with the VCU graduate students and the RCJC residents working in collaborative groups. The exchange of information and building of collaborative understandings in this approach developed over time, building an increased empathy among participants. Further, because the professor led the class, she was more attuned to the complex dynamics and changing rules of the site. These constant changes were easier for her to navigate than graduate student pre-service teachers because she is an experienced educator.

In the third approach of one-day workshops or activities, we found a number of strengths. We planned workshops around specific topics, usually suggested by the RCJC residents. They were not attached to specific classes; all the graduate students and RCJC residents participated voluntarily. This inherent self-selection provided a very engaged group who participated enthusiastically. We intentionally kept these sessions more open with a framework for discussion or activities, rather than a detailed plan, and allowed the process to unfold in an organic fashion. Interestingly, existing outside of a course structure seems to take this approach outside the realm of service-learning, but this may be part of its success. In the context of a community-engaged approach, this freedom from course requirements is something worthy of future consideration with regard to partnerships between universities and sites of incarceration.

Reflections/Analysis

Throughout the process of teaching and participating in these service-learning courses, we utilized a variety of reflection strategies including verbal, written, and artistic. Through conversation and multiple attempts to create thematic groupings based upon the information in our reflections, we came to see three overarching ideas present in the reflections. We found that our interactions with the service-learning classes at RCJC contributed to breaking our personal stereotypes of others, helped us become more aware of our racial, socio-economic, and educational privilege, and increased our ability to show empathy toward others.

Included in the discussion of these three areas is Tesni's analysis of her video reflection, created after participating in service-learning at the RCJC for 18 months.

Breaking Stereotypes

Throughout our reflections, a common theme is how our personal interactions with the residents disrupted so many of our pre-conceived notions about people who are incarcerated. Through hearing stories of their lives, open-ended discussions, and simply chatting, we learned that the stereotypes we had held were inaccurate and damaging. In one instance, Melanie was surprised by two of the residents' deeply philosophical conversation on the concepts of the "self" and "identity." At other times, during class conversations, univer-

sity students shared that their stereotype of who is “educated” or “intelligent” was previously largely bound by formal education. However, after interacting with the residents at RCJC and learning from and with many different people who have knowledge gleaned from formal and informal means, the graduate students reported a much broader understanding of how intelligence and knowledge operate.

Although Tesni considered herself accepting and empathetic, especially due to her job as an art educator at a community center serving a diverse audience, her service-learning experiences at the RCJC illuminated for her the effects of systemic racism, her privilege, and the unacknowledged stereotypes she held of incarcerated people. In a culminating video response to her experiences at the jail, she used words as well as images of historically significant sites representative of continuing systemic racism in her city.

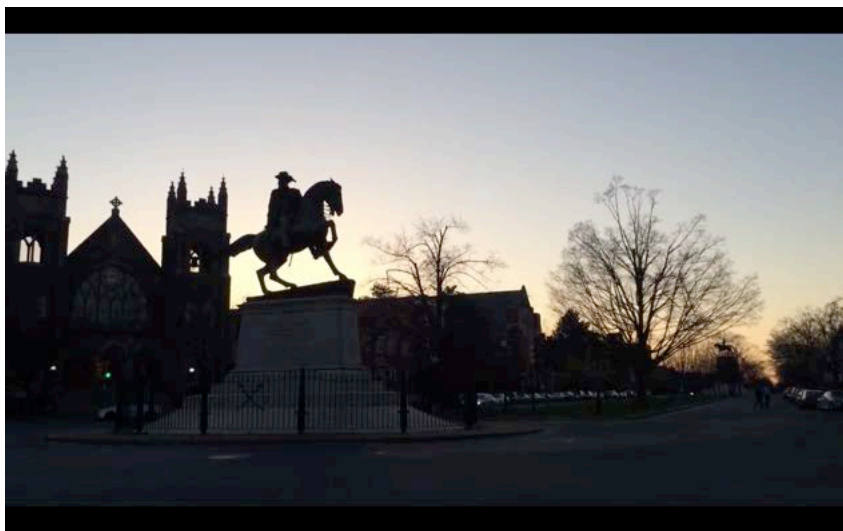


Figure 1. Tesni’s Video Reflection Screenshot. A statue of J.E.B. Stuart, a Confederate States of America cavalry general on Monument Avenue, symbolic of ongoing systematic racism. Unveiled in 1907, this monument, one of five to the confederacy, has no text or explanation offering context about how this sculpture might be problematic today.

In an effort to dispel stereotypes about who is an incarcerated person and acknowledge her shifting perspectives of privilege and identity, the video describes her experiences with the RCJC:

I know the jail is oppressive and depressing, but the people and the space we created together was inviting, fun, creative, free, energetic, comfortable, and safe feeling. I know that in a dehumanizing space, humans exist. I know that art in all forms is a release, freedom, and healing. I know that I have been privileged to work with some of the most devoted, engaged, hard working, smart, caring, open students I have ever encountered. (Tesni, personal communication, March 29, 2016)

Though certainly important for pre-service teachers, we believe this aspect of breaking stereotypes could be useful for all graduate students, regardless of discipline. Further, the graduate students came to see some of the interconnections between different social problems because they came to see beyond a stereotype and think more deeply about the people.

Awareness of Privilege

Among the three graduate classes, there were 23 students,ⁱⁱⁱ with two identifying as students of color, two identifying as men, and twenty-one identifying as women. Because the vast majority of the graduate students involved in the RCJC service-learning are white, middle class, and have had stable family environments, their life experiences are largely reinforced by stereotypes in media and in education. However, sustained contact with people from different backgrounds at the RCJC brought out greater awareness of privilege among students. Interestingly, Melanie and Courtne previously used Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) article *White Privilege: Unpacking the White Knapsack* in classes to mixed reactions with many white female students who believed McIntosh’s points did not apply to them. These students emphatically stated that they did not have white privilege, but they did acknowledge some lack of opportunity related to their gender. Wilson, Shields, Guyotte, and Hofsess (2016) point out that among white women the tendency to focus on gender rather than race is a form of white privilege. However, having had interactions with the majority-minority residents at

RCJC, the graduate students expressed a better understanding of how formal curriculum, the educational system, and the school-to-prison pipeline all function as forms of institutionalized racism.

In the context of two art classes that took the form of the first service-learning protocol mentioned above, the university students engaged the RCJC residents in interpreting works of art. In one instance, the graduate students showed a graffiti-type image by the artist Banksy that included a rat. All of us affiliated with the university had associations of a dirty animal, something to be avoided. This was starkly different from the dominant interpretations from the RCJC residents that focused on the connotation of the rat as a snitch and a representation of someone who would work with the police or authorities.

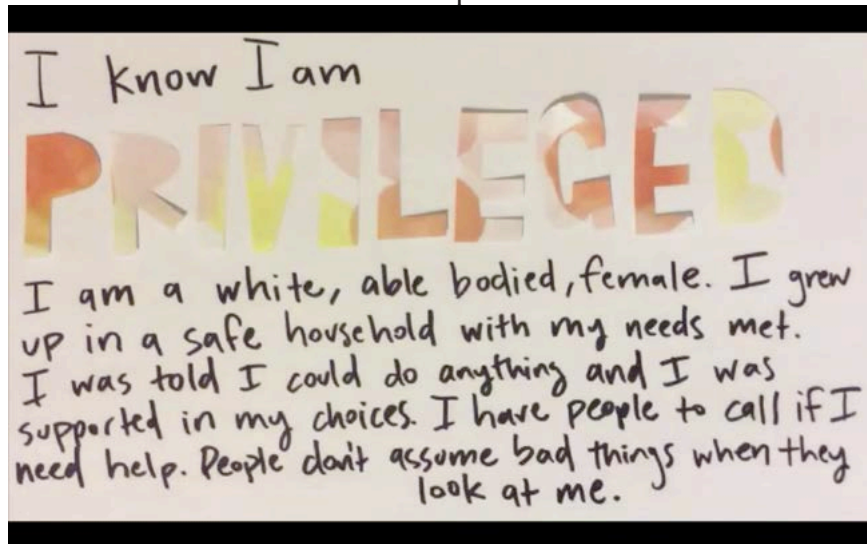


Figure 2. Tesni's Video Reflection Screenshot. As a result of relationships that Tesni developed with residents at the RCJC, her privilege that was discussed in university classes was confirmed and cemented in reality during service-learning.

This particular moment encapsulates some of the differences we became aware of between the university-associated people and the RCJC residents. We all grew up with a positive view of the police and authority figures as people who are there to help and who actually do help. We were taught that it was our civic responsibility to help the police, teachers, or other authority figures and we were to trust them. In the words of one VCU student, the ability to forget about the problematic aspects of various authority figures is just one more aspect of privilege. We postulate that it is the unique human interactions with people from different backgrounds that can allow this greater understanding to develop.

Showing Empathy

Throughout our written reflections and discussions, we shared numerous stories about the people we have come to know through our work at the RCJC. A common theme among these stories is an increased awareness of the difficulties that many of the residents experienced in their early childhood including physical, sexual, and emotional abuse; parental neglect; physical and mental health issues of their parents; pressure from family, neighbors, or friends to engage in illegal activity, including opioid use; and the various constellations of difficulties associated with dire poverty. As we discussed how hearing these stories and life experiences has affected us, we became aware of the impact on our own teaching in a variety of contexts. Tesni shared that she has now developed more patience and understanding with the adolescent girls with whom she works. Courtnie noted her increased empathy for her own students, considering their personal experiences. Melanie mentioned how she now thinks, "what else might be going on in this student's life?" when wondering about a student who may be struggling.

One topic that came up in our discussion related to our actually "seeing" the result of the school-to-prison pipeline through getting to know residents. When we learned how many of them had difficult experiences in their K-12 education, it caused us to think more about how the school-to-prison pipeline functions. For the authors, and many who choose education as a career, school was a site of growth and joy. First-hand accounts of experiences far on the other end of that spectrum illuminated real concerns of schooling and the students served in those schools, especially students of color and those living in poverty. Further, the fact that many of the residents shared their stories with us in narrative form through discussions leads us to believe

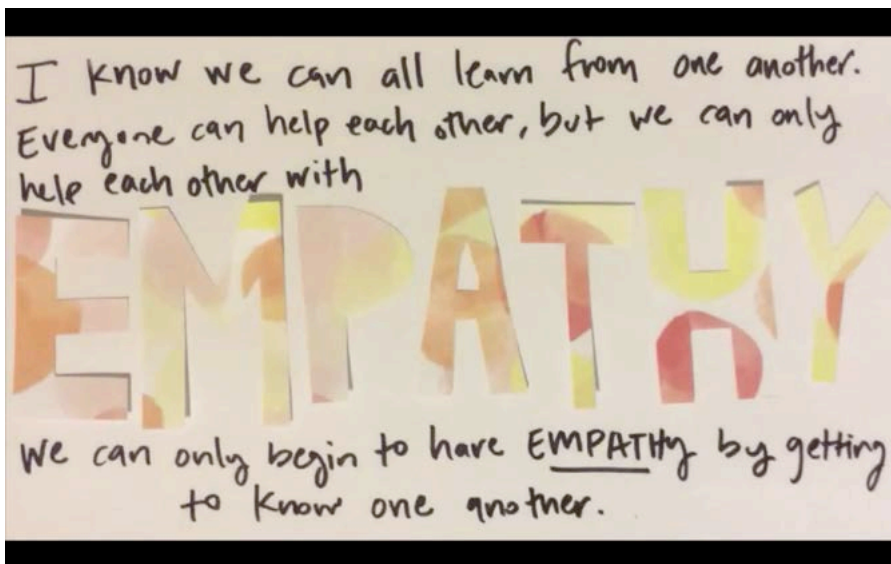


Figure 3. Tesni's Video Reflection Screenshot. As a result of Tesni's service-learning experiences, she believes that getting to know each other is one way to be empathetic humans, begin to dispel stereotypes, and overcome systematic racism.

of the residents shared their stories with us in narrative form through discussions leads us to believe that the power of narrative may help engender empathy. These stories from the lived experiences of individuals were more powerful to us than the studies and statistics which we have all read. We honed in on the experiences at RCJC, especially hearing the narratives of the residents, as building our ability to go beyond the curriculum or the requirements for a class and learn to be more empathetic with our students as complex human beings. This relates to Valenzuela's (2013) point that students may expect teachers to care about them as people first, but teachers may expect students to come to class caring about the content before teachers will care about the students as people. This disconnect of expectations can result in "schooling [that] subtracts resources from youth" (p. 289).

Service-learning Framework

Within this program, the graduate students are exposed to a significantly different learning environment with learners who have had different life experiences. The vast majority of the RCJC residents with whom we work are people of color and the vast majority of the VCU graduate students and faculty members are white. Race and class are very much a part of these classrooms and our interactions with the residents. Though we overtly address these in a conceptual sense, it was interesting how in the first approach to service-learning, not all the graduate students kept this information in mind when planning and teaching. For instance, one day the graduate student who was teaching asked the RCJC residents about different locations in town that they would like to alter artistically. During a planning session before the actual teaching at the RCJC, the professor intervened and pointed out that the physical sites the graduate students chose were in middle and upper-income neighborhoods, rather than in the parts of town where many residents lived. Thus, the planning and teaching during these service-learning experiences became ways to revisit the importance of diversity and the need for teachers to consider their assumptions and the lived experiences of their students. While there were successful aspects of all three approaches, we believe the second and third approaches were stronger in that they allowed the graduate students and the RCJC residents to build relationships, thus building empathy.

Conclusion

By analyzing our reflections, we learned more about the complex, dynamic, and powerful experiences of service-learning with graduate students in a site of incarceration. Our reflections indicate three main themes: breaking stereotypes, awareness of privilege, and building empathy. The next step for this project will be examining the effects of these classes on residents to better understand their educational experiences. Additionally, we will continue to work to expand opportunities for pre-service teachers at the graduate level to engage in service-learning classes within the RCJC. The level of maturity and self-awareness that the graduate students involved in these classes showed reinforces our belief that sites of incarceration may be well-suited for pre-service teachers to build their knowledge and understanding. Service-learning across lines of race,

class, and ethnicity may be beneficial for all students, as we live in a nation in need of greater understanding and acceptance of others.

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Endnotes

ⁱThe term “we” refers to the three authors – two faculty members and one graduate student who collaborated in writing this paper.

ⁱⁱ At the RCJC, they deliberately use the term “resident” rather than “inmate” or “prisoner.” This is part of their attempts to help the people who are incarcerated see their position as being temporary and something that they can overcome and change.

ⁱⁱⁱ Some students, like Tesni, were in multiple classes. We counted each student in each class in this total.

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