

Chapter 43

Activating Activists: Practicing Social Change in Prison Classes

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the pedagogical and practical importance of learning skills around political advocacy and community engagement in prison-based classes. The primary focus of the exercises described here is upon engaging students in exercises that develop their skills in advocating for social policies that affect them directly. Learning objectives include understanding the challenges of community organizing and consensus-building, developing policy proposal- and grant-writing skills, and developing skills around public messaging.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the pedagogical and practical importance of learning skills around advocacy and community engagement in prison-based classes. The pedagogy described below emphasizes dialogue-based discussion and collaborative action towards social change. The primary focus of the exercises we describe is on developing skills in advocating for social policies that affect the populations of people directly impacted by incarceration as well as practicing community engagement in general. The rationale for this work is based on the litany of restrictions placed upon civic engagement among incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people, and the lack of educational experiences inside prisons that focus on independent, critical-thinking and civic leadership skills (Erzen, Gould & Lewen, 2019).

Our disciplinary focus is on the sociological analysis of social problems and social change. The learning objectives we focus on include: understanding the sociological causes and consequences of social problems, understanding the challenges of community organizing and consensus-building, developing

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“hard skills” of social change (e.g. proposal- and grant-writing skills), and understanding the complexities of framing and messaging in social movements.

In the following, we discuss: (1) the development of formerly incarcerated people in social activism and community engagement, (2) pedagogical perspectives on raising social awareness among incarcerated students and practicing activism and community engagement, and (3) our experiences with developing course materials and learning exercises on these topics. These pedagogical perspectives and learning exercises are applicable in a range of disciplines and courses with incarcerated students including sociology, criminology, social work, political science, and other social science and social service courses. As we describe below, this course can be used as a stand-alone course (as we have used it) or can fit into a broader social science curriculum.

RATIONALE: LEARNING THE PRACTICE OF CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In their report *Equity and Excellence in Practice: A Guide for Higher Education in Prison*, the authors argue for the importance of framing prison education as:

...centrally concerned with promoting the flourishing of individuals, communities, and civil society, rather than as a “correctional” intervention in “criminality.” We also view this work as part of a larger movement that asserts both the value of equity, excellence, access and accountability in higher education (in prison and outside), and the central importance of creativity, critical inquiry, and independent thought—the essence of higher education at its best—in a high-functioning democratic society. (Erzen, Gould & Lewen, 2019, pp. 2)

The rationale for the pedagogy and learning activities described in this chapter align with this call for developing critical-thinking and civic engagement in prison education. Rather than concentrating on the “rehabilitation” of some “criminality,” this approach demonstrates the benefits of cultivating the assets that incarcerated students can contribute to their communities.

This focus is largely in response to the collateral consequences of disenfranchisement from voting and civic engagement imposed by the carceral system. Miller and Alexander (2016, pp. 312) outline how the carceral system imposes “carceral citizenship” under which the formerly incarcerated are “uniquely branded by the mark of a criminal record and are subject to forms of legal exclusion that would be unlawful if directed toward other social groups.”

The importance of these pedagogical strategies and learning exercises also lies in the growth of formerly incarcerated advocates and activists and their significant role in the transformation of the criminal justice system and other social institutions. Research demonstrates the importance of formerly incarcerated individuals serving as leaders and members of reform efforts (Maruna & LeBel, 2003; 2009). In addition to contributing to the success of reform efforts, civic engagement has direct effects upon their own reentry success (Uggen & Janikula, 1999). The increasing, yet limited, availability of paid and voluntary positions within reform organizations offers returning citizens opportunities to engage their first-hand knowledge of prison and can serve as a key part of the reintegration process.

Recently, groups such as JustLeadershipUSA, All of Us or None, among many others, have facilitated the growth of social and political activism among the formerly incarcerated. JustLeadershipUSA began in 2014 founded on the guiding principle that “those closest to the problem are closest to the solution,

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