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Education and Transformation *An Argument for College in Prison*

Carmen Heider

University of Wisconsin Oshkosh

Karen Lehman

Robert E. Ellsworth Correctional Center

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Critical Education Special Series

Radical Departures: Ruminations on the Purposes of Higher Education in Prison

Abstract

This essay explores the dynamics of what it means to learn inside of a prison by featuring a narrative written by a an individual who has been incarcerated for more than 20 years. The narrative explores the challenges and successes of earning a baccalaureate degree while in prison, including highlights from several courses and the overall significance of the college experience. The essay then features a dialogue between the incarcerated author and a university professor who teaches a course at the prison. The essay as a whole underscores the value of higher education in prison and the importance of supporting these types of programs.



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Introduction

A Teacher's Perspective: Carmen

What does it mean to learn inside of a prison? When I reflect on how a currently incarcerated student might answer this question, I immediately think about Karen, a student whom I have known since 2012, when she was enrolled in my *Inside-Out Prison Exchange* course.¹ I taught this upper-level, undergraduate elective at a maximum/medium security women's prison where Karen was one of 10 "inside" (currently incarcerated) students who learned alongside 10 "outside" (currently non-incarcerated) students. She is, in fact, the only person at the facility with a parole-eligible life sentence who has been allowed to enroll in the program.² At that time, she was pursuing a bachelor's degree through correspondence courses offered at a state university. I teach the *Inside-Out* course every two years, so each subsequent time I taught the class, I would typically see her in the education building. Last fall, I was pleased to learn that she had graduated with a baccalaureate degree and was pursuing a Master's of Business Administration (MBA) through correspondence courses. Though I am not employed by the correctional facility at which Karen is incarcerated, I have observed when I teach on-site at the prison that she is a role model and someone who has earned the respect of her peers, teachers, and administrators. The *Inside-Out* incarcerated students granted Karen a great deal of authority and always respected what she had to say during class discussions. Additionally, those involved in teaching at the prison have shared with me that they respect Karen and her many accomplishments. These accolades speak to Karen's status within her community. My interactions and conversations with Karen have shaped my perspective on the significance of higher education in prison, as this learning process can foster self-awareness, self-development, critical thinking skills, and the capacity to create positive change in our communities.

A Student's Perspective: Karen

As a currently incarcerated student and co-author, the question, "What does it mean to learn inside of a prison?" does not have a simple answer. To say that higher education in a prison setting is an appropriate opportunity for self-improvement is an understatement. It can be seen as a path that opens your mind to possibilities. The knowledge gained then influences the choices we make, to right some wrongs and give back to the society from which we took. It is also an opportunity to be a positive example and role model for the general prison population and those coming in behind us, to show them we can all choose to be better

¹ Lori Pompa offered the first Inside-Out Prison Exchange course in 1995 and subsequently developed a training institute so that the program could be replicated across the country. Inside-Out courses have now been offered at over 100 prisons and 100 colleges and universities in the United States and several other countries. Designed around experiential education, Inside-Out's mission, according to their website (2017), is to "create opportunities for people inside and outside of prison to have transformative learning experiences that emphasize collaboration and dialogue and that invite them to take leadership in addressing crime, justice, and other issues of social concern" (para. 1). For more information, see <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/mission-inside-out.html>.

² In Wisconsin, there is no mandatory release date for a person serving a life sentence. A judge can permit someone with a life sentence to be parole eligible at 20 years or more. Karen became eligible for parole after 25 years; she has now served 27 years in prison. Wisconsin's sentence structure excludes persons with life sentences from most programs and groups because those who have a mandatory release date take priority. This is why it was significant that she was allowed to enroll in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange course. See Sec. 973.014 (1), Wisconsin Statutes <https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/statutes/statutes/973/014/1>.

people. When you are in prison, the real goal, always in the back of your mind, is freedom. The manner in which you serve your sentence is very indicative of the type of person you will be upon release. That matters. Are you going to be a contributing member of society or are you going to continue a life of criminal activity? Learning inside of prison can change lives.

The Process

Karen

To facilitate the possibility of co-authoring this essay, Carmen contacted a prison administrator who shared with me the call for submissions to *Critical Education*. I was immediately intrigued by the opportunity to work on this paper because of my passion for higher education in prison as a game-changer for incarcerated students.³ It is also important for taxpayers, who rarely support higher education opportunities, to understand the significance and impact of such programs. I have often felt that society does not get the insight required to understand that higher education is a worthy investment. I saw this essay as an opportunity to be a voice in support of higher education in prison. We both agreed to pursue the project, with an emphasis on what it means to learn inside of a prison. I then drafted my narrative and two months later, after securing permission from the correctional facility to officially work as co-authors, shared my work with Carmen. At this point, a top administrator at the prison had granted permission for the project to proceed within specific parameters: we could meet briefly face-to-face only when Carmen was on-site to teach; no additional meetings could be scheduled to discuss the manuscript. In addition, we were authorized to pass our work back and forth during meetings, and if necessary, by regular mail. Most of our meetings occurred immediately prior to Carmen's class and during a short break in the middle. These brief meetings typically took place in the hallway or a classroom. It was also not unusual for me to ask a teacher to relay a message to Carmen so that we could speak about the project. Following the completion of the course, we corresponded by email and regular mail. In short, we made the circumstances work. I thought our system worked fine, considering the timeline we were under, but it would have been beneficial to sit down face-to-face to discuss ideas with each other. Our approach was rather typical when working within the confines of the prison: to make it work, you do the best you can with what you are given.

³ Some higher education in prison programs may be funded in part by tax dollars because of their association with public institutions, such as colleges and universities, if those institutions are using state funds to cover costs associated with attendance (which is rare). Most higher education programs in prisons, however, are privately funded, either partially or fully. In Wisconsin, there are some vocational programs offered in prisons, such as Office Software Applications, Cosmetology, Building Services, and the Dental Technician Program, that are fully funded by the Wisconsin Department of Corrections (see: <https://doa.wi.gov/budget/SBO/2015-17%20410%20DOC%20Biennial%20Report.pdf> and <https://doc.wi.gov/Documents/AboutDOC/10.16ReentryAtGlance.pdf>). However, the scope of vocational opportunities made available to incarcerated students is dependent upon many factors, including what is offered at specific facilities, eligibility requirements for that facility, program capacity, among other variables, which means that very few individuals are able to pursue these paths. In 2016, the federally funded Second Chance Pell Program selected Milwaukee Area Technical College to participate in its pilot program. As part of the program, 16 correctional institutions in Wisconsin are to offer Technical College Certificates, Diplomas, and Associate Degrees and as of 2018, are doing so via online delivery (see: <http://www.ceanational.org/phorum/read.php?10,5111>; Castro, Hunter, Hardison, Johnson-Ojeda, & Crossland, In Press).

Carmen

When I first read Karen's narrative (presented in the following section), I was struck by the ways she embodies the argument for higher education in prison. She demonstrates the transformative power that education can have for all students when critical thinking skills are honed and course concepts are applied to one's life, all of which also speak to the significance of college-in-prison programs. What follows is Karen's narrative about pursuing a bachelor's degree while incarcerated, followed by a critical dialogue between the two of us.

A Student's Narrative: What Does it Mean to Learn in Prison?

As a currently incarcerated student, I can speak to my experiences attempting to pursue a higher education degree within the confines of a prison. I earned a Bachelor of Science degree through correspondence courses in Business Administration from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville and am currently an MBA student at Adams State University in Colorado, with a focus on Leadership and Management. This program is also offered through correspondence courses.

Being incarcerated is an indescribable shock to your senses. To survive, you have to acknowledge your past actions and try to reconcile them with hope for the future. Until you can get yourself to that point, you cannot possibly think about the next step. It took me a year to feel like I could settle in and face what was in front of me and really think about what I had done to get myself here. The point for any of us is to set positive goals, be willing to make a commitment, and invest in that commitment.

I made decisions that I thought would help me cope with my incarceration and I inquired about educational opportunities because I was determined to better myself. I got involved in college programming that was offered on-site at the time, and when I realized I could do it, it opened a whole new world to me. The mere act of reading a book and thinking about the content opened a new world: reading made me think about what I could have done differently and the possibilities of what I could accomplish. Higher education became my focus and when progress stymied because of the 1994 Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (it eliminated Pell Grants to inmates) I kept my nose in books.⁴ Later, when a higher education grant became available to inmates, I again pursued my education and never looked back.⁵

The prison environment is not always conducive to learning, but it forces us to make do with what we have. For example, in the state where I am incarcerated, inmates can check email through a service called Corrlinks, but we have no Internet access. The lack of Internet access restricts research and forces me to rely on other avenues, such as asking family and friends to look up information and mail it to me. I can then turn in superior work and demonstrate that I am worthy of this investment. Knowing that others make financial investments so that I am able to enroll in courses makes it that much more important that I succeed.

I think back to all the classes (40) that I had to take to earn my bachelor's degree. What kept running through my mind were all the mistakes I had made in the past, decisions I had made that brought me here and the people I had hurt. No matter what I do, or what I

⁴ See HR 3355: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-103hr3355enr/pdf/BILLS-103hr3355enr.pdf>.

⁵ The Wisconsin Higher Education Grant became available to incarcerated individuals. See <http://www.heab.state.wi.us/programs.html>.

accomplish, I always circle back to this same theme. I truly believed I had to do something positive with the time I was given, and believed that started with education. I felt like it had become my responsibility to show that these higher education opportunities were worthwhile and a positive addition to the prison system; that the investment could help produce a well-rounded, responsible, and law-abiding citizen at release. Over the years, I have seen so many of the same people leave and return and leave and return. It is the proverbial “revolving door”. Any one of us could serve our time, be released, and give back to our communities, but we have to want to do it. Simply serving my sentence was not going to be enough.

When I enrolled in a course called “The History of Western Civilization,” I became curious about the evolution of the Industrial Revolution. I then developed an interest in political systems and how individual countries were structured, what their economic policies were, and how they treated their citizens. I wanted to know whether the wealthy were running the world and what that meant for the rest of us. Were employees being protected, their well-being looked after? When and why did employers start understanding the benefits of offering health insurance and retirement plans? Or were they simply required to do so? None of these benefits just happened, and I wanted to learn more about their origins.

The political science course “Dilemmas of War and Peace” underscored the horrors of war and its impact on innocent victims, many of them children who were ravaged by hunger, displacement, permanent separation from their families, injury, and sometimes death. Learning about these situations is a reality check; a harsh reminder that those of us who are incarcerated have nothing to fear—we have shelter, food, clothing, medical care—we have some level of security. We owe it to victims to turn our lives around and give back to those we victimized. Using our time to better ourselves carries over to our communities and it also impacts the prison system, making it more productive, not merely a warehouse.

Micro and Macroeconomics were two classes that aided my understanding of economic policy (e.g.: interest rates, inflation, recession, unemployment, and the never-ending battles about Medicare, Social Security, and health care). Comprehending basic economics provides the foundation for understanding the limits within a correctional institution, and why funding is available for some departments and programs but not others. It also helps proponents of higher education in prison recognize why it is so important to demonstrate which educational and treatment programs are worthy of the investment.

In my sociology classes we studied the social frameworks and the societal forces that shape our behaviors and generate change. Poverty, wealth, crime, drug use, and alcoholism, along with acknowledging and understanding cultural differences, all influence our choices and actions. As a result, we can recognize and reflect on the error of our ways and the social factors that led us to our incarceration. Regardless of government, religion, rules, regulations, ethnicity, education, or financial background, it all comes back to treating people with common courtesy and respect. We must understand that and live it in a prison setting and then, upon release, we can watch it carry over to our communities. It matters.

The Director of Education asked me to participate in a three-credit Communication Studies class that would bring together ten *outside* (non-incarcerated) students and ten *inside* (incarcerated) students in the same classroom. Enrollment is typically limited to inmates who have demonstrated positive conduct, an interest in higher education, and have a mandatory release date. I do not have a mandatory release date, but the professor asked whether prisoners with longer sentences could be allowed to participate. The *Inside-Out Program* has been one of the most positive experiences I have had during my incarceration. I saw in these university students a desire to understand a segment of society that is typically perceived as negative. We have committed crimes against people; our selfishness and greed have been

unleashed on our communities. We sacrificed our freedom, leaving victims in our wake, and we deserve our punishment. All of that is true, but at some point, most prisoners will be eligible for release. So, the outside students asked, what is next? We all worked side-by-side on classroom exercises; we shared insights, questions, and opinions on assigned readings, as well as a group project. What we ultimately learned as a class was that we are far more alike than different. A decision with far-reaching implications separated us. It was a lesson for all of those involved.

When it comes down to it, higher education in the prison system is only going to go as far as the public allows. One of the most difficult things to do is translate to the general public, who help pay for our state and federal prisons, the importance of *higher education* in the prison system, as many higher education prison programs are not funded through tax payer support. The *Inside-Out* class discussions could be a starting point for approaching a critical issue: whether to treat and educate those who will be released to communities, or promote the punishment-only option, which may result in releasing individuals who do not see themselves as having other options, such as higher education or employment. Changing a life in the prison system leads to positive change in communities. It gives taxpayers some return on their investment. That may sound cliché, but it is important, especially when you consider how leery the public is to invest in higher education for the incarcerated. Those on the outside may be struggling to get their own education, or sacrificing to help their children get an education, which are also legitimate concerns.

When I graduated in December 2015, I felt an array of emotions that included pride and, yes, relief. I hope the education department and the administration in this institution also feel pride. I feel very strongly that I could not have accomplished my goal without their support and approval. As I got closer to completing my bachelor's degree, I started to think about pursuing a master's degree and researched the acceptance process, degree requirements, and financial obligation. It was a challenge, but not beyond the realm of possibility. I had to locate a program offered through correspondence courses (rather than online) and because I am incarcerated, my teachers were allowed to write letters of support only within strict parameters. Despite those challenges, I was motivated to apply and grateful to be accepted. I have only just begun my MBA program, but what is different about starting this degree, compared to my bachelor's degree, is that I do not question my ability, nor do I doubt that I will graduate.

Clearly, incarceration *is* for the punishment, but it also offers the opportunity to change lives. Our horizons expand even though we are confined. Imagine the positive impact that we can have on those around us. Other inmates start to notice that we are doing our time differently; they get curious and start to think about what they could do for themselves. It is a big commitment, but others see firsthand that it is not impossible and is clearly a better choice than a life of crime and incarceration. Imagine what this thought process can do to the environment inside of a prison and for the people on the outside who are connected to us, including our children, extended family, and friends.

So, what does it mean to learn inside of a prison? It means that Corrections has the opportunity to work. It means that when an incarcerated woman completes her sentence, a better, more well-rounded, responsible, contrite, and grateful person is released back into society. That person is highly unlikely to commit crimes. That person wants to be self-sufficient and not look for a handout. The seeds of rehabilitation and accountability have been planted and have taken root in a women's prison in the midst of a few college courses that have opened my eyes to the harsh realities of my actions and the ripple effects they have produced in my family and my community. I am empowered in my own life to help make the

change from burden to contributor. As Zimmerman (2017) states, “Just as a poor education transports people into prison, a rich one can transform them beyond it” (p. 2). *That’s* the point of learning inside a prison.

Learning in Prison: A Student - Teacher Dialogue

Carmen: Much has recently been written about the importance of higher education in prisons (e.g., Karpowitz, 2017, Lagemann, 2017, Utheim, 2016, and Zoukis, 2014). After reading your narrative, I noted that a prominent theme is the way education functions as a catalyst that generates growth and transformation, which is especially important for those who are incarcerated. This type of growth entails your own personal development, including self-reflection and self-awareness; critical thinking skills, including the ways in which education fosters critical questioning, broader perspectives, and intellectual curiosity; and the ways that education can spark a desire to have an impact on our communities. I am reminded of William Cronon’s (1998) essay, in which he argues that at its core, the values of liberal education are “growth” and “freedom” (p. 73). He suggests that “more than anything else, being an educated person means being able to see connections that allow one to make sense of the world and act within it in creative ways” (p. 77). I am also reminded of Paulo Freire’s (1970/1993) concept of “conscientization” or as Francisco Weffort defines it, “the awakening of critical consciousness” (as cited in Freire, 1970/1993, p. 18). According to Freire (1970/1993),

for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform. This perception . . . must become the motivating force for liberating action. (p. 31)

While Freire writes in the context of educating adults who live in poverty, his ideas are applicable to other marginalized groups, including the incarcerated.

Karen: Education is powerful because of the knowledge gained and the ways critical thinking is encouraged through the learning process. But I also see in the faces and actions here daily, women who are resigned to their incarceration and feel that they can never rise above their felony conviction; they can never be more than that. I live among women who can never really put their crimes in the past and commit “to wage the struggle for their liberation” as Freire states (1970/1993). My fear is that *this* attitude and belief is perpetuated and the correctional system serves only to warehouse and reinforce criminal behavior as a lifestyle. I do not believe that was ever the intent, purpose, or goal, but hope and motivation can often be quite elusive in this atmosphere—that has to change. So many of the inmates here seem to be resigned to the fact that now that they are in prison, they can never be more than that.

Carmen: Why do you think that is the case?

Karen: I think anger and depression play a role in the defeatist attitude. Sometimes it just takes time to settle in and accept current circumstances before we can contemplate real change.

Carmen: Do you also see examples of women who *don’t* see prison as a “closed world from which there is no exit” but instead see prison as a “limiting situation from which they can transform”?

Karen: There are those who know they have made mistakes, but can do better. They know they have let people down, feel shame, embarrassment, and humiliation. Some people may not get to that point, but for those of us who do, transformation can happen in various ways. For some, it is education, and education can be a huge hurdle because of financial limitations, course availability, institutional approval, rules and regulations regarding computer access, and property guidelines for incoming books and class materials. First and foremost, we are excluded from almost all financial aid programs. Student loans are forbidden and grants are state-specific. In my state, higher education grants are very limited; I sometimes think taxpayers are terrified of what the bill would be if hundreds of inmates decided to enroll in college courses. What *is* legitimately terrifying is the skyrocketing cost of incarceration, rather than the financial concern about educating those who are incarcerated. It's actually much less expensive to invest in higher education than to repeatedly incarcerate people for years.

Carmen: Yes, research shows that college-in-prison programs are cost-effective and make a significant difference in recidivism rates. Lagemann (2017) notes that recidivism rates range from 2 to 17 percent for individuals who have completed college-in-prison programs, compared to national rates that are "over 50 percent" (pp. 2-3). In addition, she underscores the high costs of incarceration and emphasizes that "cutting the recidivism rate in state prisons by even 10% could save all fifty states combined \$635 million from their expenses on corrections" (p. 5). Wouldn't higher education be worth the investment, even for those who might seem resigned to their current situation?

Karen: Great question. Is it worthwhile to invest in higher education for someone who doesn't show interest or commitment, with the hope that it will spur commitment and the desire to transform? I think what is important is to continue to invest in those who do realize the value, while being positive role models and encouraging those who just aren't there yet.

Carmen: You write about the realization that you had the ability to complete a college degree, which you said, "opened a whole new world." It seems like education in this context served as a catalyst for generating self-awareness and recognizing your potential.

Karen: We are products of our environment. Prison offers a whole new reality. Future incarceration can be avoided through growth and development rather than stifled, unrecognized ability and desire. People often believe they will fail because they were always told they would fail. I was one of them. At some point, when I was out of that negative environment, I started to ask myself why I was destined to fail. Maybe I wasn't. Maybe I should try anyway.

Carmen: How did you get out of that negative environment?

Karen: Honestly, it was incarceration that took me out of that environment. After I left home I continued to use alcohol as a coping mechanism, which clearly snowballed out of control. Incarceration saved my life. Sad, but true. It is eye-opening for the incarcerated to sit back and really think about our actions and the effects we have had on others, along with the effects that social environments and social factors have had on us. We *need* to do that. This is what triggers our conscience. Introducing higher education is an effective tool in spurring that self-reflection.

Carmen: How does education do that? Can you give an example?

Karen: It was education that really opened my eyes to what was going on in the world, how much bigger it is than circumstances here, and that we all play a part in effecting a positive impact. I think about our soldiers taking bullets and the homeless freezing on the sidewalk. That's reality for you.

Carmen: As I mentioned at the outset of this conversation, I see in your narrative Freire's (1970/1993) concept of "conscientization"—especially the principle of "praxis", which entails both reflection and action as part of critical consciousness (p. 107). You have experienced a shift in your perspective, which can then generate action that potentially affects additional groups of people. Do you think this is a fair statement?

Karen: As inmates, we need to recognize and feel the impact of our crimes *and* our transformation as they impact larger groups of people and our communities.

Carmen: What does it mean to "*recognize and feel* the impact of our crimes and transformation" (emphasis added)? Why is that so important?

Karen: I don't think we can really, truly, and sincerely take responsibility for ourselves if we don't truly face our actions. I committed a violent crime and when I was finally sober and in this environment, having abandoned my children, it was all I could think about. There is so much shame in our actions, but I believe we have to feel that and face that in order to pick ourselves up and begin to transform.

Carmen: You note in your narrative the various circumstances that can impact someone's path to prison, including poverty, wealth, crime, drug use, and alcoholism. Poverty, for example, is a structural constraint that can limit the choices that one makes.

Karen: Speaking as an inmate, and being an observer in this prison, I sometimes believe society's anger about the crimes committed clouds the reality that the majority of inmates are products of broken homes, abuse, neglect, lack of education, substance abuse, and yet will be released. Education can change their "normal". Change their "normal" and watch them evolve and grow. That is the person you want at release.

Carmen: How can their "normal" be changed?

Karen: I think a lot of that falls to the role model, not that role models are responsible for changing anyone else's thought patterns, but it doesn't hurt to put yourself in the path of those who need to see it most. It's been my experience that sometimes, the less said the better. Actions truly can speak louder than words. Ultimately the responsibility lies with the individual.

Carmen: The theme of individual responsibility is a strong part of your narrative. And certainly individual responsibility is an important part of how someone grows and changes while in prison. But it is also important to consider the social factors, some of which you have mentioned: poverty, abuse, addictions, mental illness, and lack of education. These factors can impact someone's experience before, during, and after their incarceration.

Karen: There are women here who are addicts. I was an alcohol abuser; others have been abused and/or neglected as children and/or adults. A lot of us have trust issues, are angry, have no self-esteem whatsoever. Depression is very common. The mental health issues that people have to try to work through before they can even think about pursuing an education, or even effectively holding down a prison job, can be real hurdles. Honestly, time and positive experiences are what help people overcome their obstacles, and then they face the sentence looming before them. I experienced some of these issues myself and I can say that they are real and should not be taken lightly. It is so much bigger than we are. There is power in responsibility and empathy because we can put ourselves in others' shoes and consider how we would handle ourselves in their circumstances, or think about how much more dire world issues are compared to our own. It is revealing; it takes you out of here and makes you think about how you can contribute, or have a positive impact, despite your incarceration.

Carmen: Your capacity to self-reflect and your self-awareness show that you understand the impact of your educational pursuits: you can make a difference and act within your community. For example, you mention being a role model. What does it feel like to be able to do this? Prior to writing your narrative and embarking on this project, had you thought of yourself as someone who can make a difference?

Karen: I think I did realize the impact my education could have before we embarked on this project, but it has most definitely underscored it for me. I feel pride in my accomplishments, but more than that, when a person has that battle in her head between not feeling good enough, or knowing that her own parents never believed she was capable and would always be a disappointment—having overcome that mental battle, always trying to tamp down that alcohol-saturated negativity—having gone beyond that and believing in myself—none of that negativity touches me anymore. It just doesn't matter. There is always room for a good role model and positive example. Working on this project has really made me think about how far I have come—it has been a great reminder, but it also reinforces my belief in higher education and how important it is for the “downtrodden”, if you will. It's a great feeling to be able to give rather than take.

Carmen: Freire (1985) states that one of the key tenets of conscientization is to provoke recognition of the world, not as a ‘given’ world, but as a world dynamically ‘in the making’” (p. 106). Your narrative demonstrates this tenet; through your many examples of self-reflection and self-awareness, you reveal that the world (and your own life) are not static, but are instead “unfinished” (Freire, 1998, p. 66) or always in the making.

Karen: I think that is the point, really. Education generates self-reflection and forces us to think about our actions and how we can be better people. Education is revealing in that the more we learn about other cultures, about history, about the sciences, the more we learn about ourselves, our thoughts, opinions, beliefs, and how we may change and contribute. Rather than looking at what we can get, we look at what we can give. So many take it for granted, but for inmates, its ripple effects are powerful. Change has to be worth investing in. I also think it is worth repeating that we can all change. I literally ask people here if this lifestyle (incarceration) is really enough for them. Are they content or do they want to be excited about their lives? Sometimes the questions get them thinking. It is critical thinking that, for me, really made me face the truth of how much I hurt people and what the effects were. It is hard to face that and still sleep at night. This is what really drives a person to focus on change. We can't take back the past and change what we did, but we can try to do good in the future.

Carmen: What you are saying here really seems to show how much deep and thoughtful work you have done through self-analysis and reflection.

Karen: Yes, I've had time to think about it, really deep reflection. It's anything but easy, but I think it's necessary.

Carmen: If some of the incarcerated population seem static or incapable of change, could the challenges of that type of self-analysis and reflection be one potential reason why? That type of change is very difficult and probably pretty painful.

Karen: Absolutely! It's so hard to face our negative actions, so many people just refuse to confront their criminal behavior because it is shameful and because of the turmoil you have to put yourself through. Avoiding this process can be cowardly and it can demonstrate a lack of responsibility and accountability, but we have to acknowledge that some of the trauma people suffer in life helps to mold bad decisions. Confrontation and self-analysis can be ugly; confronting oneself can be ugly.

Carmen: Your critical awareness of the broader world is evidenced in the part of your narrative focused on “The History of Western Civilization,” a course that prompted you to ask questions about the Industrial Revolution, the political system, and the history of employee benefits. You question whose interests were (and continue to be) served by governmental decisions and there is an ethical underpinning about what is fair and just for ordinary citizens, particularly employees. You also demonstrate a sense of curiosity about the ways in which social change happens: for example, employee benefits did not always exist, so what prompted these types of programs? In short, your narrative reveals, in the spirit of Freire, an awareness that the world is “not a given”; it is always in process and people have the collective capacity to create change.

Karen: You sum it up nicely. Being incarcerated, I am exposed to a diverse group of people who have come from all different backgrounds and experiences. The majority of us arrive here damaged and need healing, and we change to be the people we need to be and should have been. It is only the collective effort that can make that happen.

Carmen: What is an example of how that type of collective effort happens?

Karen: As inmates, we often get so stuck feeling sorry for ourselves and just want to do our time and get it over with. That attitude is not going to change until we give it reason to. There is no better inmate here than the one who becomes a role model and is willing to risk telling her fellow inmates exactly what they need to hear, not what they want to hear. We have to. I say “have to” because I think it becomes our responsibility to share our experiences and our knowledge. We are responsible for being better people at release. Our communities deserve better people at release. In addition, there are so many educational and treatment programs available and we have to be willing to inquire and approach staff who can point us in the right direction. It has been my experience that when staff members see a sincere effort and willingness, they go all in to help you. We also have a mentoring program that is comprised of staff and inmates who work together to foster positivity, a smoother on-site transition, and self-improvement. Not to steal the phrase “It takes a village”, but it is a collective effort.

Carmen: Is part of what you are saying here that you have a responsibility to “call out” your peers on their potentially “static” or “given” existence? And maybe one of the first steps on the path to change is to hear what you don’t want to hear?

Karen: Yes! “Suggest” may be a better word than “call out” and in a one-on-one scenario, but really, that’s what it is. We have to call people out and help them realize they are worthy and capable. They/we *have* to hear it, as unpleasant as it is.

Carmen: By challenging and mentoring your incarcerated peers, I think that you, again in the spirit of Freire, act upon and transform the prison environment. Similarly, Cronon (1998) highlights the idea that “liberally educated people understand that they belong to a community whose prosperity and well-being are crucial to their own, and they help that community flourish by making the success of others possible” (p. 78). Your narrative demonstrates these tenets in a powerful way.

Concluding Thoughts: What does it mean to learn in prison?

Karen concludes her narrative by underscoring the impact that higher education has had on her life. “College courses,” she emphasizes, “have opened my eyes to the harsh realities of my actions and the ripple effects they have produced in my family and community. I am empowered in my own life to help make the change from burden to contributor.” These statements encapsulate the shift in perspective that is often indicative of

engaging in higher education. Throughout her narrative, Karen embodies the argument for higher education in prison, which, as she demonstrates, fosters self-development, critical thinking skills, and the potential to create positive change in the broader community, impacting those on both the inside and outside of our prisons. She demonstrates that higher education is a key catalyst in this transformative process, which underscores the value of such programs within our prison system.

From my perspective as an incarcerated person, higher education in the prison system makes us think about and face experiences and decisions in our lives. It makes us look at ourselves in a critical way and acknowledge that we must make our own changes in order to fully re-join society. We can, as a concerted effort between inmates holding themselves accountable and society providing the funding and/or social support, make a difference in our thought process and negative behaviors. Most of us will be released, so at minimum, our communities deserve to have returning citizens who did everything they could while in prison.⁶ I feel so strongly that Corrections serves two purposes: punishment and rehabilitation and further, that rehabilitation is rooted in treatment and education. I am just one example of transformation within the prison system. Education is the catalyst that shuts out the negative background noise, helps us to make sense of our current circumstances, and more importantly, to overcome them—in other words, transform.

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⁶ Ninety-five percent of incarcerated people are released in the United States. See <https://www.bjs.gov/content/reentry/reentry.cfm>.

Authors

Carmen Heider is a Professor in the Communication Studies Department at the University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh.

Karen Lehman is a currently an incarcerated student at Robert E. Ellsworth Correctional Center in Wisconsin.

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