

## Teaching in a Total Institution: Toward a Pedagogy of Care in Prison Classrooms

LAUREN WOLF

CUNY, Hostos Community College, USA

**Abstract:** *This paper argues that a pedagogy of care can help reduce some of the human damage caused by incarceration. Rather than casting incarcerated men and women outside of the moral community and turning prisoners into a “them,” a pedagogy of care promotes inclusion and the creation of human connections. Recognizing prisoners’ humanity helps to dissolve some of the effects of institutionalization and may foster rehabilitation. Instead of limiting teachers to providers of information, as a traditional classroom expects, a pedagogy of care elevates teachers to human constituents of a learning community. This paper outlines a pedagogy of care in the teaching of college mathematics in medium and maximum-security prisons. It is based upon knowledge gained through 15 years of teaching in traditional college classrooms and seven years in prisons. The basic components of the pedagogy of care covered in this paper include communicating to students that learning matters, fostering high expectations, creating a welcoming space, and engaging student interest.*

**Keywords:** *college-in-prison, pedagogy-of-care, STEM*

The practice of care occurs in relationships, and the educator is the subject responsible for ensuring that care permeates the relationship, then a core task of pedagogical reflection is identifying the relational postures which shape good and right care—that is, care which facilitates the flourishing of the human being. (Mortari, 2016, p. 455)

Teaching for seven years in three medium and maximum-security prisons has taught me that prisoner-students, like students in my more traditional classes, respond exceedingly well to kindness and care. To state that these students thrive in a classroom environment in which they are treated like human beings, may seem, at best, a statement of the obvious, and at worst, an offense. However, it is easy to gloss over the fact that what is often at stake in prisons is humanity itself. This became obvious to me when I entered prison to teach for the first time.

### The College Program

The elite prison college program I taught for had a standard of excellence not seen in the previous university and community colleges I worked in. The program had very high standards and a non-conventional college selection. They attempted to make these college classrooms the true satellite pilot that could be modeled by other college programs who wished to engage the work of college in prison. Their main goal was not to treat incarcerated students differently but to treat them as they did their students on campus. The program believes all students deserve an education.

As I walked into the facility and handed over my belongings, it was obvious that the correction officers were not thrilled that I was there to teach. They searched my bag and had me walk through a metal detector. Then I sat in the lobby until there was “clearance,” a security



designation indicating that walking through the hallways is allowed at that time. Later I would learn that “clearance” does not always happen; there were times other professors and I had to leave without teaching. In general, the corrections officers, during the orientation process, painted a picture that characterized prisoners as manipulative sociopaths.

Unfortunately, no matter how eager the students were to learn, there were some prison logistics that inserted themselves into the classroom from day one. Students often came very late, and had to leave very early, due to lockdowns and other prison movement rules. The conditions were difficult and unpredictable: it was constantly either very hot or very cold, and even finding chalk was challenging. However, none of that diminished the fact that the students were a captive audience, eager to learn.

### **The Classroom**

Education is one way to reconnect incarcerated individuals with the moral community, and it has been argued that the pedagogy or andragogy of care is an effective way of maximizing educational outcomes (Knowles, 1988).

The classroom was immediately welcoming. Teaching in prison is like no other experience. The students were usually waiting, and sometimes working on a problem on the board, when I arrived. There were times where they could not make class because of mandatory callouts or if someone got in trouble and was not allowed to return for a while. Students got in trouble for infractions such as having a pencil in the dining hall, and the prison didn't care if they were missing a test or important material. The students cared, however, and were so attentive, unlike some of the other students in colleges and universities I had encountered. Math is cumulative, and it is important to first understand the basics like multiplication, addition, subtraction and fractions. However, most of all, it is critical to make students feel secure enough to succeed.

For older students, researchers emphasize the importance of learning that responds to what students already know to start in a place of emotional comfort and then grow their knowledge through challenge. Sometimes students do not have past experience to contribute to the meaning-making. In this case, the emotional hook becomes especially important (Goralnik, et al., 2012, p. 415).

The classes taught ranged from developmental math (basic algebra) to three hundred level college courses, real and complex analysis. The students went from basic knowledge of mathematics to high-level courses, such as discrete math and linear algebra in some cases. The students returned home after serving their sentences and have been in contact with me.

Most students, prior to my class, had strong backgrounds in the liberal arts in this competitive liberal arts program. We are conditioned to believe that prisoners are uneducated and lack the skills to be successful in difficult college-level courses. Most students I came across in the prison were products of underfunded, overpopulated, public schools, not citizens with low IQ's, as society conditions many to believe. I am always in awe of how we don't expect a certain group of individuals to be articulate and how readily these students disproved that stereotype.

### **Background**

“The rates of imprisonment in the United States are very much intertwined with race and class” (Haney, 2012, p. 2). It is important to note that 66% of upstate New York inmates come from neighborhoods in New York City (Christian, 2005). New York's poor urban neighborhoods have an educational income gap of \$358 per student and a \$549 five minority gap per student (Arroyo, 2008). As Robert Moses and Charles Cobb, the authors of *Radical Equation*, say minority students in poor urban school districts have continuously been tracked out of math, and many lose access to opportunity through segregation in mathematics classes (Lad-

son-Billings, 1997).

## **Education**

Although there are many articles that point to the value of prison education, in terms of recidivism and job prospects after prison; few articles on prison education have discussed pedagogical methods in prison classrooms (Matthews, 2000). Prison education is almost exclusively discussed in terms of reentry and recidivism, never pedagogy (Esperian, 2010). While education reduces recidivism by as much as 40%, “college education during incarceration has the greatest impact” in reducing recidivism (Davis, 2013; Hall, 2015). Furthermore, much of the research on the pedagogy of care has focused only on its implementation for students in grades K-12 (Mcbee, 2007). This practitioner piece suggests that the total institutional aspects of prison, combined with the barriers of math education, make a pedagogy of care a highly effective form of teaching, particularly in a prison classroom.

### **Care and Math in Prison Classrooms**

This section offers a look into a prison classroom where care and compassion play a big role in the learning experience. It discusses methods and techniques used to teach not only a tough subject, but also to teach effectively in difficult settings.

#### **Creating a Welcoming Space**

When it comes to creating a classroom environment, my natural disposition is welcoming, and I take it into the classroom with me. My formerly incarcerated students often point out that their math courses with me represented a space within the prison that allowed them to momentarily forget that they were in prison, temporarily leaving the total institution. For these students, and any marginalized students, a welcoming environment starts with being treated like their thoughts and ideas matter. That is a space I work hard to create for students in all my classroom settings, and the students respond well to it. For instance, one former student commented that the prison classroom experience “humanized us by providing a space to express ourselves in a way we could not normally do in prison.” In order to create a welcoming space, I have found several practices to be essential.

One practice I began implementing on the very first day of any class was endeavoring to foster a personal connection with each student. When the students come into class, I feel it is important to acknowledge them, to say good morning or good evening, and to ask them how they are doing. I always strive to do this in a welcoming tone, and I think it is imperative to make eye contact with each student as I greet them. Over time, I also make sure to learn each student’s name and to use their names when greeting them (Larson, 2015). I find this to be especially important in a prison setting where inmates are literally identified by numbers. It is also vital to be sincere in these interactions with students. I have found that students seem to recognize my sincerity when I remember details about them and their lives that they brought up in class and then ask them about these details.

I also firmly believe that it is essential to creating a welcoming space to share some of my own personal experiences with my students. The students and I are constantly sharing stories: stories of prior math classes, or of helping their children in math. We also break to discuss current events, but many of the students’ favorite break is story time. Story time is taking a break from the monotony of math class to share stories. The students, when exhausted or frustrated, would say, “hey professor, it’s story time.” We would break to tell a story or a joke and then return to the lesson plan feeling renewed. This technique relaxed students and met them on a common ground.

My experience in prison has taught me that these simple strategies help to make the students feel welcomed in the classroom. A student commented, “This welcoming space helped me to not worry what level I was on, and asking questions was not intimidating. Then we could

get a better understanding and build on our mathematical maturity.”

### **Communicating High Expectations Combined with Learning Matters**

One practice that worked very well in communicating high expectations was to lead students to the correct answer by trial and error. If the students were headed in the wrong direction, and I asked guided questions, then the students could often self-correct. This level of critical thinking was of the utmost importance in creating strong mathematical backgrounds and a sense of accomplishment.

Another practice which has been highly effective is to tell all my students they are A students; it's up to them to keep the A or to receive a lower grade. This practice created a space of high expectations that included a belief in their abilities, rather than a professor that says “you all have an F; it is up to you to prove yourself.” The professor that says the latter doesn't appear to start off with a strong belief in students' abilities.

These particular students had a love for learning that actually made it easy to communicate high expectations. I continuously found myself comparing these students to my university students. This dimension of pedagogy of care was also a lot easier for another reason: my incarcerated students had no preconceived notions about what was considered too difficult. This allowed me to raise the bar, constantly asking them to prove theorems and derive formulas, which always appeared to be a daunting task at the university, but not in this environment.

A certain personality and love for the subject drew students into the same cast: always engaging and wanting more. My students follow me, and I hold their attention as I finish a new concept or long problem with reciting “ahhchhaaaaaa,” in a high-pitched key. The enthusiasm I bring to class is what has always engaged my students and created a recipe for success. When students perceive the genuine concern and care of their professor, they not only enjoy the class, they thrive.

The assignments the students received in the prison classroom were much more challenging than those in the university or community college for two reasons. The first reason was I had high expectations, and the second was that I saw there wasn't a barrier found in a traditional classroom setting. This barrier would be the belief that the material was hard before even attempting the problem because of previous rumors. As a professor you often hear, “everyone says trigonometry is so difficult,” which instantly convinces students that a task is hard. Nobody in the prison classroom came into calculus two hearing the rumors that calculus two is the hardest 100 level class. Instead, they came armed to learn, and therefore, I could expect more enthusiasm than fear. Since these students had no preconceived notions, we would prove all the theorems that I would skip over in a university or college classroom outside the prison.

“The space that professor Wolf created made us lose our math anxiety, and I could, for the first time ever, actually enjoy learning math,” a comment from a student who has always struggled with math. This pedagogy allows a professor to demonstrate the patience and determination to see each of her students grasp the mathematical concepts. It allows the process of taking the time to sit down with individual students and personally walk them through the process. Oftentimes, it aids in relating complex concepts in terms that may be more easily grasped by students having difficulties, thus making them feel that education matters and to create a welcoming environment. The most entertaining part of creating a welcoming environment was shared moments of acknowledgment that led to an aha moment. Our classroom took us out of the confines of the prison walls to an important, happy place where students felt that not only did learning matter and high expectations were key, but a relaxing calm space gave them the desire to transform their mathematical knowledge.

An important aspect of helping students learn mathematics is math esteem; math esteem helps you believe in your abilities (Wolf, 2015). “Growing up, I was always intimidated by math. It was like a complicated puzzle that you either could or couldn't solve innately. There was this idea of being or not being a ‘math person,’” but through believing in him, and provid-



ing a safe, welcoming, engaging, and inviting environment, this student went on to take four hundred level complex analysis.

As a 34-year-old, I found myself in a college-in-prison program tinkering with the idea of taking math courses beyond the required college algebra course I had already completed. Although I was both nervous and anxious when I started pre-calculus with the professor, she quickly extinguished my fears by pragmatically demonstrating that math, like any other discipline, is learned and honed through practice...[I] felt invited, and safe, and most of all loved. And more than simply teaching me math, she invited me to join her in the practice of math. She didn't simply give me methods, approaches, and answers to math problems; she helped me discover those methods, approaches and answers.

My students often told me how they were so engaged, they worked late hours as a group solving problems and helping the less advanced students.

More importantly, she was a master at identifying when I was grappling with a mathematical concept and swiftly explored alternative approaches to ensure I got it. With that said, for me, the professor's most valuable attribute as a teacher was making sure that I never felt like I was in the dark as a student.

This student is now a successful member of the 21st-century workforce, and the time he spent engaging in mathematics furthered his ability to think critically.

### **Engaging Students**

When it comes to engaging students in the classroom, experience has taught me that interaction between students, and with diverse subjects, leads to engagement in learning math. Incarcerated students' curiosity made it easy to enact a pedagogy of care. These particular students had no preconceived notions as to the difficulty these topics, thus reducing the impact fear would have. In comparison, many students in traditional mathematics classrooms say, "oh, everyone says this is so hard," therefore reducing their self efficacy before even getting started. Students in the prison come without these fears, which is not only refreshing, but allows the professor to go way beyond what levels are normally possible in a traditional classroom.

Another way to increase engagement is through club involvement. My students joined a math club I started and became dedicated to attending the meetings. In these meetings, students discussed math history and participated in learning new math tricks that immersed students more fully in the subject.

If you are comfortable in a classroom, and with your students, then the class will be OK. "Lauren, it's story time," the students would say, and we would break from the rigor of solving for  $x$ , and I would talk about one of my children, or the drive to get there that day, or current events, or social activism. Your students are more than just vehicles to accept knowledge, and they know or perceive when the connection is real and when you are sincere in your admiration and respect.

The pedagogy of care is a fairly new concept, however, caring in the classroom is as old as the first formal institutions themselves (Bartell, 2011). It is a fairly recent pedagogy that helps professors like myself explain my teaching philosophies and classroom tactics. I try to engage my students, and at the same time, I try not to be condescending. I also make it clear that I am also a student: always learning, growing, and capable of making mistakes. A former student said, "It is so refreshing that the teacher makes mistakes and admits she makes mistakes." In addition, this warm and caring environment was two-sided. During the semester, the students would assign reading materials to me, and I read all of their recommendations, including books by Michel Foucault, Loey Wacquant, and *Confessions of an Economic Hit Man*. Our professor-student relationship was a give and take.

### **Conclusion**

In the classroom, the students were able to leave the institution of prison behind for the two or three-hour block and were transported to another place. A place where they wanted to create a better life, and a place that the professor was able to show compassion and admiration, and know them personally, not just as a number in a cold harsh space. I encouraged the students to believe in themselves and to be critical thinkers. Mathematics is a beautiful subject, and I enjoy sharing that beauty with my beloved students. Instead of dwelling on the professors and teachers that don't or won't care, we must change the climate into one that is a warm, safe, and loving place.

The conclusion of this practitioner paper is to share this experience as creating a way that people who are disenfranchised can not only learn, but be made to feel human. This particular pedagogy could transform all disenfranchised teaching environments, and potentially even the playing field, for those in urban school districts that are not given the same advantages or funding. Teaching with care, in a total institution where the students are sheltered from warmth and nurturing, gives the students the ability to feel whole, thus forging through the constraints and achieving great success. When you are in prison, you are viewed as a number, and that is how you are supposed to feel; human interaction and professors that genuinely care make it easier to succeed.

### **Looking Back**

A total institution makes a person a number, void of self-identity. The pedagogy of caring takes an instructor out of the traditional way of teaching which allows students to prosper and develop knowing that you are wholeheartedly rooting for their success. One imperative technique is to allow students to realize there is more than one way to solve a problem, therefore not limiting their creativity (Furner & Duffy, 2002). That first semester taught me so much about myself and how to not just try and show compassion, but to really feel that belief in one another can help your students achieve greatness. Many of these beginning algebra students went on to take calculus. At the beginning of class, we would discuss what was on our minds, it was my way of supporting self-expression and sharing before we went into the lesson.

### **An Update on Some of the Students**

Of the eight students that were followed, they are all home and living successful lives. There has been no recidivism amongst these eight men, and they all have high-powered jobs. One of my former students wrote a book and owns a computer programming business, and he also runs a non-profit to help families of incarcerated individuals. He attributes math, and the respect of his professor, as a strong pillar of his foundation in his success upon reentry. This particular student wrote in his book that "the high expectations this professor had bestowed on us, made me achieve more success; she explained how biased math is against marginalized students, and it made me strive harder."

Another student, who is a program associate at a large non-profit, said that math has helped him organize data, tasks, and even thoughts, in a more systematic way. He would not have even gone on to study mathematics had it not been for the compassionate care the professor showed for her students. Another student is program manager at a large non-profit bail fund, where he also claims that the sheer kindness of professors helped him become who he is today. In his spare time, he works with youth to keep them out of trouble. The fourth student is special assistant to the directors of a non-profit private college prison program. This particular student earned several degrees while incarcerated, because those moments of intellect, combined with compassion of the professor, took him away from the total institution environment.

Noddings (1988) said:

A relational ethic is rooted in and dependent on natural caring. Instead of

striving away from affection and toward behaving always out of duty as Kant has prescribed, one acting from a perspective of caring moves consciously in the other direction; that is, he or she calls on a sense of obligation in order to stimulate natural caring. [It] energizes the giver as well as the receiver...From the perspective of caring, the growth of those cared for is a matter of central importance. ( p. 221)

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