

Teaching and Researching Incarcerated Women: Undergraduates Explore Education as a Human Right

“I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits.”

—Martin Luther King, Jr. 1964

Finding innovative ways to engage undergraduates in learning can be a challenge for faculty members. High-impact experiential practices, such as service/community-based learning, collaborative/undergraduate research, and “diversity learning”—that is, studying “difficult differences” such as racial, ethnic, and gender inequality, or continuing struggles around the globe for human rights, freedom, and power—have been found to be effective ways to increase student learning and to study human rights (Kuh 2008). According to Amnesty International, “Human rights include civil and political rights, such as the right to life, liberty and freedom of expression; and social, cultural and economic rights, including the right to participate in culture, the right to food, and the right to work and receive an education” (Amnesty 2013). When talking about human-rights abuses in undergraduate courses, though, students often envision the experiences of children and adults living continents far away. Students rarely locate human-rights abuses in their own cities, counties, or states.

The innovative undergraduate research project discussed here focused on the human right to education, and the setting was a women’s prison not far from the Westminster College campus. Initially, I did not frame the experience for my students as research into human rights, but upon reflection both I and my students found ourselves mired in questions about the role of the state to “respect, protect, and fulfill” (United Nations 2012) the human right to education for incarcerated women.

The experience also encouraged students to question the education that many of the women received or did not receive before they ever set foot in the prison, as well as other human-rights issues that shaped the lives of the women, such as sexual abuse and violence at the hands of intimate partners. It is not all that surprising that this project initially was not framed as a human-rights project because human-rights education is a relatively young field (Teleki 2007).

I believe that a feminist “action research” framework (Reid 2004B) is ideal for projects researching human-rights issues and also for involving undergraduates in faculty research because it provides more opportunities for students and members of the group being studied to inform the project. Such research projects also provide for interactions between students and the research subjects and opportunities for students to see the people affected as human beings. This helps them make connections among different human-rights abuses. More specifically, looking at human-rights issues in prison encouraged students to consider punitive versus rehabilitative philosophies. Our work ultimately has generated suggestions for how readers might construct their own innovative projects on human rights.

The Project’s Background

This project started serendipitously when the school principal of a women’s prison was a guest speaker in our criminology course. He stated that upon their arrival to prison, incarcerated women tend to be less educated than incarcerated men (Sharp et al. 1999), that women’s prisons typically offer less educational programming than do men’s prisons (Pollack 2002; Ross and Fabiano 1986), and that those who receive post-secondary courses in prison are less likely to commit further crimes after their release (Mercer 2009; Wade 2007). After the class session, two students approached me about educational offerings in prison. Within a week, the three of us decided we were going to pursue co-teaching the Principles of Sociology course in the women’s prison while we gathered information about the women’s educational experiences through focus groups.

The project did not just fall miraculously into place. We had to methodically seek out approval from our institution and from the Department of Corrections for the research, as well as approval from the college and the correctional facility for the college course. It was ten months later that we arrived for our first class and focus group in the fall of 2011. A second phase of the project occurred with two new students in the summer of 2012.

Westminster College is a teaching-focused, liberal-arts institution in western Pennsylvania that enrolls approximately 1,500 undergraduates. This project fit within the mission of

Westminster College, because among the desired learning outcomes for students are that they “acquire knowledge of self, society, and human cultures,” “apply knowledge to contemporary issues,” and “demonstrate moral and ethical commitments to neighbor, society, and the natural world” (Westminster College 2013). Like many small, liberal-arts colleges, at Westminster student-faculty research is promoted among faculty in disciplines in which student-faculty collaboration is possible. Teaching and researching incarcerated women increased the students’ knowledge of self and others, allowed students to use their critical-thinking skills to analyze and respond to the educational experiences of the women, and demonstrated a commitment to not only study the women to increase their own knowledge, but also to engage with and give back to the prisoners whom they were researching.

From my perspective as a faculty member working in the Department of Sociology and Criminal Justice Studies, this project was the perfect merging of teaching, scholarship, and service on multiple levels. Through mentoring and collaborating with my research students, as well as teaching the criminal-justice course, I was expanding my teaching skills. Through the focus-group study, I was engaging in scholarship, and through the teaching of the course we were serving our community.

The Approach

The project was both innovative and based on high-impact practices, such as service learning, undergraduate research, and diversity learning. It was innovative in that not many undergraduates have the opportunity to teach and to conduct research. As mentioned above, a feminist “action research” framework (Reid 2004B) structured this research and teaching project, and collaboration between students and faculty was a main goal of the project. Feminist researchers challenge a norm of hierarchical relationships in academic research, believing that everyone has a valuable perspective to bring to the table (Harding 1987). Feminist action research is well suited for research on human rights because its ultimate goal is to respond to social injustices through advocating collective action and social change (Reid 2004A). Similar to Freire’s concept of praxis (Freire 1970; Hooks 1994), the goal of such research is to act and reflect upon the world in order to change it.

Four students and faculty worked together to choose the appropriate research method, co-wrote the institutional and Department of Corrections research proposals, created questions for the focus groups, and shared leadership of focus groups and responsibility for transcribing the tapes of the

focus groups. Together we also analyzed the data and co-presented the research at a national conference.

Feminist qualitative research often gives voice to underrepresented groups (DeVault 1999; Reid 2004B), so valuing and integrating the perspectives and ideas of both undergraduates and research participants is important. The focus groups provided a space in which incarcerated women could be heard, share aspects of their lives, and be active participants, even co-researchers, in the research process.

Focus groups (N = 14) were conducted, 7 in fall of 2011 and 7 in summer of 2012. Each group consisted of four to six women and lasted from about 90 to 120 minutes. The women were asked about their educational backgrounds, typical days in prison, current educational opportunities, and plans for the future.

Students’ learning was not limited to the research process, however, but was also experienced while teaching the women either the Principles of Sociology or Sociology of Families courses. The format for the course was that in every class session the two students were responsible for teaching a portion of the class, either leading small discussion groups or conducting other activities. Each student was also responsible for organizing one entire class session. Since the focus of the research project was on education, they were able to use classroom interactions with the women, as well as the homework assignments they submitted, to learn more about the women’s educational backgrounds and ability.

Students’ Reflections on Human Rights

Besides teaching the prisoners in the classroom or interviewing the women in focus groups, students also had time to chat with the women about their lives. All of these interactions provided the researchers “projects in humanization”—which Valerie Kinloch and Timothy San Pedro have described as projects “grounded in acts of listening that situate us as researchers, advocates, and humans who work with, and not for, each other and other people” (Kinloch and San Pedro 2013). While each student came to the process with preconceived notions, through observing and listening, they began to see the women as human beings. When asked what he took away from the classroom about the educational experiences of the women, Joe, a senior with double majors in criminal justice and biology, said:

The women taught me one very important lesson. Just because someone is incarcerated does not mean [she is] ignorant, uncultured, or unintelligent. The complexity of the thought processes within the class papers and discussions paralleled

that of a regular college class within Westminster. Furthermore, the eagerness to learn and complete assignments was also refreshing. The personal nature of the papers was profound and at times startling. ... A desire to learn and willingness to complete complicated tasks in many ways rivaled and even surpassed the motivation of my college peers.

Joe expected women who were not motivated to learn, but instead found women who were motivated to learn and prepared for each class.

When asked what she took away from the classroom about the educational experiences of the women, Katie, a senior majoring in political science and minoring in sociology, said:

The biggest thing that I learned about the educational experiences of the women was the range [and] generally how well educated the women were. It was eye opening to see that some women had trouble locating Pennsylvania on a map, while others were extremely well versed in current events.

So while Joe found the women extremely motivated and, at times, more talented than his peers, Katie was surprised by the range of educational ability in the class. Interacting with, listening to, and teaching the women, as well as reading their written work, allowed the two Westminster students to see how the women in prison differed from, yet in some ways were similar to, their peers at Westminster. Offering the students opportunities to humanize the women was a necessary component in a productive project on human rights.

The formal spaces of the focus groups and classroom provided great insights for the students, but the time in the van traveling to and from the correctional facility was also crucial to the students' reflections during the research process. The facility was approximately 75 minutes away from campus, providing ample time to plan on the way and then allowing us to really dig into our expectations, observations, and experiences on the way home. This was the space in which I felt that I was able to do the most mentoring, since it was removed of the traditional faculty-student hierarchy and thus ideal for modeling a feminist action research project. For example, Jenn, a senior majoring in criminal-justice studies, said that as the faculty mentor, I was:

Constantly asking questions to make me dig deeper and think beyond the surface. My research would not nearly be as in-depth as it was. [The faculty mentor] encouraged us to think for ourselves and not be afraid to take things in a different direction. The only thing that may have hindered me was just being intimidated in the beginning, but that's

just because I was nervous. Throughout the summer I think we began to work better together and really fed off of one another.

One example of the mentoring that I provided Jenn was through exploring and comparing her competing experiences that summer. Jenn was interning at a county detectives' bureau while teaching and researching at the prison. This was a productive scenario for a faculty member because on one hand Jenn's dream job is to be a state police officer who chases "the bad guy." On the other, she is interacting with, teaching, and humanizing "the bad guy." It was in the space of the van that I pushed Jenn to think more deeply about the connections she might make to her future work as a state police officer. Part of her project in humanization was creating more gray area in her conceptualization of "good guy" and "bad guy."

As mentioned earlier, this project was not initially framed as a human-rights project, but through the research framework and student and faculty reflections during the project, the human-rights issues clearly emerged. Katie said the following about how the project changed the way she thought about incarcerated women:

Overall, it taught me that many incarcerated individuals are where they are as a result of many ingrained social issues and inequalities in the U.S. So many women that I met could have a very different life if they were given similar opportunities that I had growing up and as a young adult. It really reaffirmed my belief in education and the huge benefits that it can have on an individual and that a rehabilitation [focused] form of incarceration is necessary in the U.S.

Through her research and teaching experience, Katie identified the structural and social conditions that shaped the life experiences of the incarcerated women she met, but she also was able to broaden this to the large number of incarcerated individuals in the United States through preparing the literature review for our presentation and research paper. So while this project was primarily about education, the students were able to make connections to other social conditions that shaped the lives of the women prisoners.

Jenn noted the following about how the project changed the way she thought about incarcerated women:

This experience opened my eyes to the hardships and struggles that these women have faced. Their pasts have shaped their experiences. Many of them come from abusive backgrounds, a never-ending circle [of abuse].

Jenn, who used our focus-group data for her senior capstone research, realized that education was linked to other areas of the women's lives. In particular, she became quite interested in the ways that childhood sexual abuse, family violence, and violence involving intimate partners shaped the women's educational experiences—and thus their human rights (Human Rights Watch 2013).

Joe noted the following changes in his thinking:

Personally, it enabled me to see them as people rather than a mass of faceless individuals. I learned of their personal stories and witnessed their emotions (pain, delight in success, humbleness, remorse, etc...). All in all, my sociological imagination was morphed to understand that sociology does not end at the prison gates but thrives in the prison structure. Furthermore, I witnessed the vast issues that exist within the structure, as well as the closed minds of upper authorities. Reform is needed, and the system is broken and possibly counterproductive. Despite these negative factors, I also witnessed amazing humanism and altruism from both prison employees and inmates alike.

Joe recognized the structures outside and inside the prison that shaped the women's lives, but he also realized that the research and teaching experience allowed him to see the humanity of incarcerated individuals, as well as of the employees within the prison—understanding that might not be gained through reading journal articles and books.

The students' reflections highlight how the interactions with incarcerated women were significant to their learning about human rights generally and education, more specifically. Their experiences also reinforced why using a feminist action research framework was ideal because it provided spaces for mentoring, open dialogue, non-hierarchical relationships, the voices of underrepresented groups, human-rights research, and social change.

Ramifications of Feminist Action Research

Ultimately, feminist action research seeks social change. While this project began as a way to learn more about the experiences of incarcerated women, as it progressed my students and I, as well as the incarcerated women, realized its potential to facilitate social change. I will admit that going into this project I underestimated the incarcerated women; however it was not their academic ability I underestimated, but rather their potential to seek out social change. One amazing, unintended consequence of this project was the

organizing power that emerged from the women in the classes and focus groups. For example, one student, Shelby, was so empowered by the class and research project that she recognized the need for a re-entry class, previously absent, to help women who were about to re-enter society after serving their prison terms. She and two other inmates started the first ever inmate-run re-entry program at the prison.

Other incarcerated students advocated for more college-level classes, asking for a Westminster course book so they could request classes that interested them. Other students wrote letters to politicians, friends, and attorneys requesting that more attention be paid to education, particularly higher education, for individuals in prison. Their letters paid off; two state senators contacted the researchers requesting the results of our research, and their attorneys and friends sent money to continue offering classes to the women. A third class was just offered by a colleague in the political science department, and more are planned in the future. In addition, book groups have been organized for the women by faculty at Westminster. Thus researching and teaching incarcerated women affected the women in a way that I did not predict before the project. Not only my students, but also the women in the classes and even some women who did not take classes, benefited from this research project on human rights. The incarcerated women continue to advocate for what is rightfully theirs—an education.

Constructing Projects on Human Rights

Constructing an innovative research project on human rights can be a lengthy process, but the value of it to students and participants is well worth the work a project like this need not be limited to sociology or criminal-justice studies, but also can be used by faculty and students in biology, pre-law, political science, nutrition, pre-med, chemistry, economics, computer science, and more. The key ingredients include a focus on considering access to human rights for all social groups, getting ethical access to the group at hand, winning institutional approval for the research, and then perseverance, patience, and an appropriate research method and agenda that promotes social change.

For example, immigration is a social issue that has implications for many disciplines. In a review of immigrant rights on Amnesty International's website (Singh 2013), there are references to incarcerated immigrants being held in solitary confinement, being denied access to health care, education, and food, as well as access to legal rights such as family reconciliation. Immigrant groups provide a myriad of ways that faculty from a number of disciplines might study human rights.

Students in economics might study the contribution that immigrants make to Social Security since it is common for immigrants to be portrayed in the news media as taking more than they contribute to such social programs (Tavernise 2013), yet that is not necessarily the case. Students in education might research the access that the children of immigrants have to education, while donating their time to provide education to those very children. Or perhaps pre-law students could interview immigrants who are in detention to determine if they are being treated fairly.

Projects do not need to be as politicized as immigrant rights; there are a multitude of human-rights issues to address locally. Problems in access to food or “food insecurity” is another social issue that might be researched. Many associate this issue with developing nations, but research suggests that even in developed nations, including the United States, the number of undernourished people is on the rise (McClain-Nhlapo 2004; Severson and Hu 2013). Students of nutrition might work with food pantries to interview food-pantry users on their dietary habits, to provide feedback to the food pantries on food that is actually consumed. Students in nutrition could provide culturally relevant recipes that users are likely to follow and that also maximize health benefits. Students in computer science might work with food pantries to develop software for tracking food use over time.

When I was a graduate student interning at a domestic-violence shelter, I recall that staff members were in dire need of a way to track their crisis calls; at the time they had hundreds of thousands of paper files that were taking over the space in the shelter. A student in computer science eventually created a database system that allowed volunteers taking the crisis calls to enter data from the calls into a computer database. This not only allowed the shelter to easily fashion reports to its funders about the volume of the shelter’s activity, but more importantly, it also allowed the staff members to efficiently generate their own reports so that they could get a sense of who was calling with what sorts of issues. They have slowly been able to eliminate their paper system.

So the ideas for human-rights projects are limitless, but planning a socially conscious, ethical research project is necessary to increase student learning and also to minimize difficulties associated with the research. Going into the project with a feminist lens might reduce any backlash associated with studying human rights, such as resentment of those in the research, as it ideally creates a common ground, but it also promotes giving something back for the participation of those in your study. Recognizing student researchers and research participants as co-researchers or co-collaborators in the process is a way to insure that all perspectives are valued in the process. Uncovering underrepresented voices in the research process is especially productive.

For example, in a study of the users of food pantries, clients could be interviewed about their perceptions of how much and what food is best for their circumstances. In addition, framing the study as one that pursues social change allows those whose human rights have been compromised to feel that their participation is making a difference, not just assisting faculty members in getting tenure or students to expand their learning. All stakeholders must feel that their voices are heard and that they are not only giving information, but also receiving benefits from the research process.

Conclusion

Creating research projects that engage students in multiple high-impact educational practices increases the likelihood of student learning. Researching and teaching human rights is a developing field that is meant to help students humanize those whose rights have been denied, while also more broadly highlighting structural and social inequalities facing groups of people. A feminist action-research framework provides a structure for completing an ethical project on human rights that not only highlights injustices, but also seeks to create social change. Faculty members considering such projects do not have to go far to research human rights; they can look to their own communities to study human rights and to open the way to create social change in their communities.

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