

INTRODUCTION FROM THE ISSUE EDITORS

Walls to Bridges

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BACKGROUND

This special issue of *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* (JPP) focuses on Walls to Bridges, a prison education program that brings together incarcerated and non-incarcerated students for university and college classes in a prison setting. Inspired by the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program based in the United States, Walls to Bridges (W2B) Canada was established in 2011. W2B began as a single university course offered through the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University (Laurier), which took place in a prison classroom at Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI) in Kitchener, Ontario. The national office is located in the Faculty of Social Work at Laurier, with the heart of the program being a collective of incarcerated women at GVI (the GVI Collective) and formerly incarcerated women in Ontario (the Ontario Community Collective). The GVI Collective functions as a steering committee for the National W2B office and are the central trainers for a specialized immersive five-day instructor training required for educators who wish to teach a W2B class.

W2B challenges the artificial boundaries between people experiencing imprisonment and those who are not; a notion that is reflected in the W2B byline: “We are One, Not the *Other*”. Beginning as a sole pilot class, W2B’s reach now extends to four Canadian provinces and one European country (France). To date, 73 classes from 15 universities/colleges and correctional facilities have been offered, providing 1,263 students with a W2B educational opportunity. Classes are offered in a wide array of disciplines such as Social Work, Gender Studies, Criminology, Literature, and Philosophy, making the national program interdisciplinary and intersectoral – bridging academic and correctional institutions.

Alongside the goal of reducing barriers to post-secondary education in carceral settings, W2B seeks to challenge traditional Western approaches to education (premised on a hierarchy between teachers and learners, and a one-way transmission of knowledge), along with the stereotypes and stigma so often associated with people who are incarcerated. Indigenous and Black peoples are significantly overrepresented in Canadian prisons (Office of the Correctional Investigator, 2017; 2020), making access to education also an

issue of racial/cultural equity. Thus, W2B classes draw upon Indigenous learning circles (Hart, 2002), which foster “places of connection that invite paradigm shifts” (Regan, 2006, p. 19), and aim to unsettle colonial ways of thinking and being. Pedagogically, W2B classes are consistent with transformative educational theorists such as Paulo Freire (1970) and bell hooks (2003), who centre lived experience as knowledge, reciprocal learning, and creative methods of learning.

Furthermore, sharing diverse perspectives on course material among those who are living in different contexts can be transformative and lead to fresh perspectives and actions towards social and personal change (Pollack, 2014). As Nicole Kish writes about taking a W2B class while in maximum security prison: “I began to find something I had lost in the trauma of experiencing the penal system: my voice. Even the simplest activities that occur within the [W2B class], such as reading aloud, listening and being listened to within a group of people, and being encouraged to disagree and challenge ideas, counteracted the negative impacts of imprisonment in max. Being allowed to be this way during classes reminded me of the self I developed before my imprisonment and class after class, slowly but surely, I regained confidence, vitality, and drive that I was not aware I had lost” (Freitas et al., 2014, p. 308).

Much of the research and scholarship on W2B reveals that, regardless of the specific course taken, W2B learning circles, community building activities, and dialogue significantly impact both inside and outside students’ understanding of white privilege, assumptions, and biases about ‘the other’, sparking a commitment to social change outside of the classroom (Pollack, 2016). Both inside and outside students also note the significance of the pedagogical model that emphasizes equality, dialogue, and collective learning (Larson, 2013; Pollack & Edwards, 2018; Sferrezza, 2018). Instructors, too, find the pedagogy liberating, leading to increased awareness about the problems associated with colonial educational methods and the transformative potential of sharing power in classrooms (Kilty et al., 2020).

CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF WALLS TO BRIDGES

W2B Canada turned ten years old in 2021 as the world had come to a standstill because of the global COVID-19 pandemic. As you will read about

in this issue, our classes were suspended across the country and access to correctional facilities was not permitted, creating both a host of challenges and creative ways of continuing to work together. Despite these difficulties, we wanted to celebrate the decade of achievements and reflect upon how the program needs to evolve into the next decade. Like everything else, our anniversary celebrations were held virtually, thanks to a Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) Connection Grant that enabled us to hold four symposiums during the fall 2021 and winter 2022. The symposium presentations covered four themes: *Unsettling and Reflecting on W2B Pedagogy*; *Navigating Power in and out of the Classroom*; *Understanding and Deepening the Ongoing Impacts on Students and Alumni*; and *Evolving and Repositioning Our Work*. Our central goal was to provide a forum in which those with lived experience of incarceration could speak about their experiences of W2B and access to education. We were fortunate that several federal prisons allowed inside alumni to virtually attend and speak during the symposiums. Additionally, formerly incarcerated W2B alumni and instructors were also given an opportunity to share the rewards and challenges of being involved in this type of transformational learning. Most presentations were offered in collaborative format – consistent with our approach of creating bridges across prison walls, and between professors and students – showcasing the power and change that can occur when conventional hierarchies of expertise are destabilized. One of the outcomes of the anniversary celebrations is this special issue of *JPP* dedicated to W2B.

THE PROCESS AND FOCUS OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Consistent with W2B values, this special issue reflects the importance of building solidarity and collaboration between those who have been incarcerated and those who have not. The nine articles included in this issue intentionally foreground the expertise and leadership of those who have been criminalized, working to decentre academic ‘experts’ both in the classroom and in scholarship. In W2B classrooms, we focus on wholistic learning that involves the mind, body, emotions, and spirit. Similarly, in this issue, authors have been encouraged to utilize a range of expression beyond traditional academic discourse, including expressive arts, personal storytelling, and conversational interviews. These articles also reflect deep collaboration

between inside and outside individuals, and educators and students, but came with challenges. In addition to lockdowns, members of writing teams being moved to another institution, having no ability to contact some writers, and institutions requesting permission for publication, the pandemic brought new complexity when outside members were not allowed to visit and collective meetings were suspended. Thus, the writing in this issue reflects the persistence and deep relationships of those involved in the W2B program.

In the articles that follow, writers reflect on the work of the last decade, writing about how W2B pedagogy can facilitate personal and collective transformation, the importance of building relationships as a form of learning and unlearning, and the power of collective decision-making and creation. Authors also highlight the ways in which anti-Black racism and colonialism underpin both prisons and educational systems, addressing the ways in which these oppressive ideologies emerge in W2B programs, harm students and instructors, and call us to an ongoing need to transform our work to centre Indigenous sovereignty, as well as uproot white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Indeed, many of the articles push readers to consider the future work of W2B, including: Indigenizing W2B and including Elders in circles; increasing the leadership of those who have been incarcerated, both when inside and released; forming and strengthening new collectives and regional leadership across Canada; and continuing to push boundaries about what counts as knowledge.

The issue opens with Sandy Anderson, Savage Bear, Sara Howdle, Chantel Huel, Lisa Prins, Allison Sivak, and Bonny Spencer, writing a piece called “The Heartwork in Walls to Bridges: A Conversation on Anti-Colonial Education and Incarceration”. In this piece, the authors discuss the W2B partnership between the Edmonton Institution for Women and the University of Alberta to centre Indigenous worldviews, Elders and knowledge keepers, and ceremony in the classroom. Melissa Alexander, Denise Edwards, Hayden King, Lorraine Pinnock, and Rai Reece write about their experiences collaborating on a workshop for the W2B symposium in “Walls to Bridges: Evolving our Work within Carceral Spaces by Rupturing Racism and Oppression through a Participatory, Collaborative Process”. In this piece, authors share personal narratives about their experiences of anti-Black racism and colonization, and push readers to reflect on the critical importance of Indigenous resurgence, Land Back organizing, and the Black Lives Matter movement as pedagogical practice, both inside and outside of prison classrooms.

Written by the W2B GVI Collective, “The Walls to Bridges Grand Valley Institution for Women Collective: Staying Connected across the Wall during the COVID-19 Pandemic” reflects on the challenges of continuing to work together through institutional and public health restrictions, and celebrates the creation of a 10th anniversary video and a creative project entitled *A Book of Collective Survival in Pandemic Times*. This piece includes examples of art-making and personal testimonies that demonstrate the importance of finding ways to reach out to each other, even in the most restrictive circumstances. Reflecting on the harm of “limit situations” both before prison and while incarcerated, Rachel Fayter shares a powerful autoethnography entitled “The Transformative Potential of Walls to Bridges: My Journey into Becoming a Whole Self”, which articulates the role that W2B played in integrating her mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual identities as an act of liberation.

In the second half of the issue, Tam Le, Nathaniel Plourde and Jodi Dueck-Read provide guidance to future prison group facilitators and educators on how to create these kinds of transformation experiences. In “Facilitating Groups in Prison: Decolonizing, Destigmatizing and Egalitarian Approaches”, the authors stress the importance of understanding social identity, the violence in and of prisons, conflict resolution, and rejecting the colonial authoritarian facilitation approach that is pervasive in carceral settings. Also rejecting of colonial approaches, the W2B British Columbia (BC) Collective share their most important experiences with the first W2B class held at Fraser Valley Institution for Women in “Reflection in Five Moments: Walls to Bridges at Fraser Valley Institution, BC”. Reflecting on the power of friendship in W2B classrooms, Vanessa Slater and Jahmar record their conversation with each other about resilience, humour, and challenging of assumptions in “A Bridge Interrupted”. Following this, Emily Bridge, Cathee Porter, and Shea Wilson describe their process and sharing their visual art, poetry, music, dance, and multi-media video for the 10th Anniversary Symposium in “Together in Spirit: Collaborative Art-Making across Time and Space”. The special issue then closes with a *Response* written by Aislinn Gallivan, Jennifer M. Kilty, Sandra Lehalle, Rachel Fayter, Ikram Handulle, Alexis Truong, Michael Tshimanga, and Abigail White entitled “Emotions in Pedagogical Practice: Relational Ethics and Collectivity Building in W2B”. The piece, which primarily focuses on the experiences of W2B professors and non-incarcerated students, underscores the ways in which relationality and emotions in the classroom

help provide meaningful educational experiences that extend beyond the conclusion of the course.

As we reflect on this special issue and the work of W2B over the last decade, we are moved by what is possible when individuals and groups with different life experiences make decisions to reach towards one another in solidarity, relationship, and creativity, even in times of duress. Despite many walls, the bridges that have been forged through this program serve as pathways for personal and social change. It is our hope that the wisdom shared by the authors in this issue lead the way for the next decade of work and will continue to inspire all of us to consider alternative ways of learning, teaching, and sharing with one another.

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