ARTICLES

The Heartwork in Walls to Bridges: A Conversation on Anti-Colonial Education and Incarceration

Sandy Anderson, Savage Bear, Sara Howdle, Chantel Huel, Lisa Prins, Allison Sivak and Bonny Spencer

ABSTRACT

In Fall 2019 and Winter 2020, the University of Alberta (UofA) facilitated Walls to Bridges (W2B) courses at the Edmonton Institution for Women (EIFW), the federal penitentiary for all prairie provinces, which includes Treaties 1-11, as well as peoples from the north. While the students' engagement with course content was the basis for the academic credit they received, much of the facilitators' course development emphasized Indigenous pedagogical frameworks. This article is a candid discussion between facilitators (also known as the Unruly Women), knowledge keepers, and W2B alumni on their insights and motivations for their involvement. We discuss the impact of anti-colonial education, including circle pedagogy, in carceral settings, and the significance of including Elders and knowledge keepers in our W2B classrooms. Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and sharing is our focal point. Given that Indigenous Peoples are incarcerated at much higher rates than non-Indigenous Peoples, we create space where Indigeneity and Indigenous worldviews hold priority. Our non-Indigenous co-conspirators also weigh in on the navigation of Indigenous-centred spaces and offer advice to those who seek to engage in Indigenous-centred work. Throughout our paper there are quotes from our W2B 10th Anniversary panel entitled "The Heartwork in Walls to Bridges: A Conversation with Elders on Incarceration", as well as excerpts from discussions following that event. These are reflections on our collective thought process on the significance of Elders, ceremony, and critical Indigenous Studies shaping our W2B classroom.

BEGINNINGS

Savage: Tân'si, Savage Bear nitisikason, Montreal Lake First Nation ohci niya. Hi, my name is Savage Bear and I come from a reserve called

Montreal Lake, which is in northern Saskatchewan. Teaching Walls to Bridges (W2B) is some of the most fulfilling, challenging, and intimidating work I've ever done in my life. I'd like to think that all of our ancestors had a hand in guiding us on this journey and brought us to where we all are today. We begin with a story. The long version is told over multiple days, so we included an abridged version below. This story, "We're Eagles, Not Chickens!" is an old one, and we acknowledge Don Coyhis and Bill White from White Bison Speaks for this version. The story illustrates how our knowledges, self-reflections, and relational work can be a bridge to anti-colonial wellness, transforming limiting beliefs into self-determination.

We're Eagles, Not Chickens!

There was a farmer out in the forest and he heard gunshots. He walked to where the shots were fired and found on the ground two eagles lying there. Somebody shot both of those eagles. All of a sudden he heard a little noise and looked up, and there was a nest. You could hear little eagles in the nest. So, he climbed up that tree and looked in the nest to find two little eaglets. He didn't know what to do so he put them in his pocket and climbed back down the tree and went back home. He was trying to figure out what he should do with the baby eagles, so he said to himself, "I'll just put them in with the chickens". He took them out to the chicken coop and put those eagles there.

As time went on, they grew a little bit and one day they were talking with each other in eagle language. And one said to the other, "You know, we're different. We don't look like them".

Then the other one said, "Don't be talking like that. We're chickens. I talked to some of those chickens and they told us that we're chickens. So don't be talking like that".

Time went on and they grew a little bit. Pretty soon one came back and said, "You know, we're really different".

The other said, "Just shut up! They taught us how to crow, we flap our wings like they do, we walk like they do, we do everything like they do. We're chickens".

Summer came and one of the eagles went walking down a path and kind of strayed away from the flock. As he got into the forest a little bit, he began to hear laughter. It was a really hard, gut-barrel laughter. He looked up to see an owl sitting in a tree. So, the eagle looked up at the owl and said, "What are you laughing at?"

The owl kept on laughing and he said, "I'm laughing because you're acting like a chicken. You're an eagle but you're acting just like a chicken".

But right away the eagle says, "No, I'm a chicken".

"No", said the owl, "you're an eagle!" The owl couldn't convince him so finally the owl flew down and landed by the eagle and he said, "I want you to get on my back and hang on". So, he got on the back of that owl and the owl took off down the runway and made elevation and started riding the air currents. Pretty soon the owl was way up in the sky. He said to his passenger, the eagle, "This is you. You soar with the wind. You look way out. You can fly higher than anything".

The eagle is hanging on the owl and he's so scared of the height and he's saying, "No, I'm a chicken, I'm a chicken. Get me back down".

By then the owl is getting ready and he says, "I really hate to do this to you, but I've got to do it". The owl just flipped over. The eagle went tumbling through the air and the owl dived down alongside the eagle and he said, "Spread your wings, spread your wings".

"I can't, I can't".

"Spread your wings!"

But pretty soon the eagle started to put out his wings and the wind started to catch them, and all of a sudden… all of a sudden, he just started soaring. He couldn't believe that he was soaring. He was just amazed.

After a while he landed and went back to the chicken coop, and the other eagle was still sitting in there. He was trying to snag those chickens and all

that stuff. Making the moves and competing with the roosters, but the other eagle said, “Brother, come over here. He whispered into his ear and he said, “You know something, we’re eagles, we’re not chickens”.

But then the other eagle got indignant and said, “Oh no! Don’t you be talking like that. They trained us, they told us what we are. I can do it really good. I can be a chicken really good”.

“No”, the other eagle said, “that’s not who we are”. They argued a little bit and the one who had flown said, “I want you to come for a walk with me”. He took his brother for a walk and met the owl, and together they put him on the owl and up they went, riding the air currents, just like the other time. Pretty soon the owl flipped over and down came the eagle with his wings out. He began to soar. And he learned. He learned that he, too, was an eagle. We heard this some time ago and knew the meaning behind that story. Did you ever have that happen? Sometimes you sit there, and your heart is just heavy. It’s just heavy and you can’t understand how come. Or you feel like you belong somewhere, or there’s things people are telling you about yourself and you say, “No, that’s not me. I don’t think that way”.

Except when you write grants and other things, because you have to do those kinds of things in chicken language. We’ve learned that we have to do that. But we can’t forget, we’re not chickens. We’re eagles.

The eagle is the symbol of our strength as a people. It is time we declared clearly and boldly: We are not chickens; we are EAGLES! We must teach our children that they are not destined to be chickens, they are destined to be EAGLES!

Our new history begins today!

Reflection

Savage: The “We’re Eagles, Not Chickens!” story reflects the burden of colonial assumptions, that can lead to hopelessness and dispossession felt by many Indigenous Peoples. The story is also one of hope, strength, and triumph. My mother and grandmother had the greatest influence over me and in their eyes I was always an eagle; chickens never entered the conversation.

For many Indigenous folks, myself included, other influences have told us we are chickens. Even Indigenous Peoples like myself who are educated off-reserve, still must hurdle over invisible (and some not so invisible) barriers. This candid discussion between W2B alumni, Elders, knowledge keepers and facilitators examines the implications of post-secondary learning within the walls of a prison. As an Indigenous educator, I constantly apply anti-colonial educational practices, circle pedagogies, and other Indigenous cultural and intellectual activities within my classrooms. So how does this work in a W2B class? We hope that this article will shine a light on these pedagogies and that future participants, learners, and facilitators (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) within W2B can utilize our experience to include Indigenous pedagogies in societies' collective steps towards actual truth and reconciliation.

W2B Edmonton started because of the collective work of Allison Sivak, Savage Bear, Jen Ward, Lisa Prins, and Sara Howdle at the University of Alberta. The group became known as the Unruly Women Group (UWG). Through their commitment to developing collaborative and relational learning spaces with fellow unruly women inside EIFW, our work made W2B Edmonton a reality.

THE AUTHORS

Bonny: I am a Métis, Grandmother (Kohkum), great grandmother (Chapan), knowledge keeper, and ceremonialist. I am part of the Heyoka Society (Sioux). I am one of four Sundance Chiefs for the International Sundance. I am also a retired Social Worker and educator. In my retirement, I naïvely accepted a request from my mentors to come to EIFW to provide ceremony and traditional teachings for the women engaging in their traditional healing journey. I thought at the time this would be a good transition to retirement and a slower pace in life. I was so wrong as it has been full on and has become a large part of my life. I am now going into my thirteenth year and continue to carry a passion for empowering women to break the cycle of the generational impacts of colonization. I have been described as a hard-ass and quoted as saying, "Come on, you can do this, I know you can do this!" I continue to believe that education is our buffalo and affords us the opportunity to redefine our own identities as Indigenous women, shed the labels and roles we acquired from generations of colonialism, and clears the path to harm reduction and healthy living.

I returned to university as an adult with a husband and three children on the journey with me. Education and ceremony empowered me to live my best self and discover my gifts. I knew from lived experience how education contributes to our healing and empowerment, so I willingly jumped on board with the Unruly Women Group as the cultural and spiritual support. I believe the success of the students lies in the building of relationships and trust. I unapologetically use the relationships and trust I have with the "inside students" to push with kindness and encourage the women to really step out of their comfort zones, and take a chance on themselves at a time in their lives when they question their worthiness and ability to succeed.

Chantel: I'm an alumni of EIFW's 2019's Indigenous Resilience course. I'm not one for talking about myself too much. When people ask where I'm from, it's a hard question. I don't know where I'm from biologically, but I can tell you where I have come from. I was adopted into a white middle-class family at the age of one. I'm a mother, daughter, friend, sister, and a grandmother. I'm also a formerly incarcerated person, a former drug addict, and former gang member. Within all these things, I'm a survivor. It was at EIFW that I first found out about the Unruly Women. They were teaching a few courses and I got to know them by coming to those classes. I felt broken, and scared coming back again [to EIFW], and all the trauma I had been through. My friend convinced me to go to those first classes. It became a safe place to come to. I got a thirst and wanted more and more every time you guys came.

I remember Kookum Bonny sharing the story [We're Eagles, Not Chickens!] with me when I lived in Pathways. We learned it in circle – within a traditional healing program house. I learned things about myself, light bulbs were going off constantly. It gave me a greater understanding of who I am and what I can do.

Sandy: Also an alumni from the Indigenous Resilience course, I got to take W2B from the inside, so I know what it's like [being] with these ladies in a circle and how carried away we can get with talking. For me in my life, education has always been important. So when there's an opportunity to learn something [like W2B], I do it. One thing W2B did for me was to help me realize that no matter what my mistakes were, things change, and you can grow. You can learn from your mistakes. W2B was one of the things that was

normal for us – to go to class and to be with other people. And talk to people about something different besides where we were and why we were there.

Savage: I've been volunteering and teaching in prison settings for over a decade. I've long been drawn to my sisters and brothers who occupy this oppressive setting. For many Indigenous People, we're pulled in the direction of where our presence makes the most sense. I feel incredibly grateful for the upbringing I had with my mother and grandmother and it was their guidance that encouraged me to follow my current path. When I heard about the facilitator training for W2B, I knew it was part of my journey. As the Director for the Indigenous Women & Youth Resiliency Project, it was clear that prison education would be a major part of our work. The Unruly Women's Group formed naturally as we all felt and acted upon a deep sense of social justice. In 2021, I took on a new role at McMaster University as the Director of the McMaster Indigenous Research Institute and we have continued our prison education work with Grand Valley Institution for Women.

Sara: I'm a treaty-one settler and was the Coordinator of Dr. Bear's Indigenous Women and Youth Resilience Project within the UofA's [University of Alberta's] Faculty of Native Studies. The Resilience Project and the UWG spearheaded and managed the infrastructural reforms needed at the UofA to not only create a W2B program, but to establish a pathway for women on parole to attend on-campus courses for audit or credit. In spring 2021, I accepted a position at McMaster University as the Assistant Director of McMaster's Indigenous Research Institute. Along with developing a prison education project at McMaster, I'm also the Assistant Director of W2B Canada and a PhD Candidate in History from York University. I completed my W2B facilitator training in June 2019 and co-facilitated NS280 Indigenous Resilience, the UofA's first W2B course with Dr. Jen Ward in Fall 2019.

Allison: I am a white settler, and work as Public Services Librarian at the University of Alberta. I have been volunteering my skills with GELA (Greater Edmonton Library Association) Prison Libraries Project for fifteen years. In my volunteer work, with a team of volunteers, I developed and offered multiliteracy programs inside prisons and prison libraries; these include writing workshops, book clubs, art workshops, and more. Savage

suggested we both attend Inside-Out Prison Exchange training in 2017, with an eye to develop courses at EIFW. An invitation to Lisa at HUM 101 to offer a course resulted in the three of us starting what would become the Unruly Women Group with Jen and Sara.

Lisa: I am a white settler and I run a free, adult education program through the UofA called Humanities 101. For over a dozen years, I have had the pleasure of learning and thinking about whose knowledge counts in a classroom. I work to develop unique, anti-oppressive curricula that celebrates many ways of knowing and learning. In 2019, I completed the W2B facilitator training and since then have been co-facilitating W2B courses at EIFW. Working with the UWG was an incredible gift. To collaborate and learn from a group of brilliant minds with joy and humour is something to hold close.

Jen Ward was an Unruly Woman and a central figure in our Edmonton W2B family. She began her journey to meet her ancestors in February 2022. She was an Indigenous scholar from the Umpqua Nation, as well as a fierce and kind person. Jen worked as a curriculum developer for the UofA's Centre for Teaching and Learning, and in Fall 2019 co-taught our first W2B course, NS280 Indigenous Resilience. Most importantly, she was our dear friend and we dedicate this paper to her. We've included an excerpt below from Jen about our work together and her commitment to ethical education. These words are hers, but she did not share them for this paper. We have chosen them because they're ideas that she often shared with us.

Jen: My lived experiences as an Indigenous woman experiencing colonialism, being the child of an incarcerated parent, and being an adult educator in higher education for 15 years has informed our collective's W2B programming. I feel that my commitment to facilitating a learning experience for incarcerated women at EIFW W2B is a collective. It takes all of us working extremely hard to make this program happen.

SETTLER COLONIALISM AND INCARCERATION

While settler-colonialism simultaneously works insidiously and openly, its definitive task is to replace an Indigenous population with a settler-thinking society. Dispossession, incarceration, isolation, and confinement are some historical and current tools that settler colonial states use to make Indigenous

lands and resources continuously available for settler use. While Canada has a long history with the overrepresentation of Indigenous Peoples within the correctional system, skyrocketing incarceration rates counteracts the argument that colonialism is a "dark chapter" in Canada's past (Cunneen & Tauri, 2019). In 2021, the federal Correctional Investigator's report noted that, "The population of federally sentenced Indigenous women increased by 73.8% over 30 years. Indigenous women comprise 43% of the federally sentenced women population, up from 23% in 1990-91" (Zinger, 2021). Zinger (2021) also notes "[that] in the very near future, Canada will reach a sad milestone where half of all federally sentenced women in custody will be of Indigenous ancestry, despite representing less than 5% of the total population of women in Canada and … that much bolder and swifter changes are required". These upsetting and shameful statistics have deep roots within Canada's historical and contemporary colonial reality. In her research on the development of the Canadian prison system, Vicki Chartrand (2019, p. 69) notes that the prison system is a tool of colonization, within "historical settler processes of dispossession, assimilation, and segregation".

Changes to federal corrections, commencing in 2016, brought about direction for a more culturally appropriate response to the increasing population of Indigenous women at EIFW. Part of these changes was to develop Indigenous Intervention Centres (IIC). IIC incorporate an integrated correctional approach designed to meet the needs of individual incarcerated Indigenous women through a culturally responsive approach to case management that maximizes involvement of the Indigenous community, while at the same time using an Indigenous lens at intake in the development of a healing/correctional plan (Correctional Services Canada, 2017). Valerie Gow maintained the strong stance in her previous role as IIC Program Manager that in order to preserve the integrity of Indigenous program delivery facilitators of core programs must be of Indigenous ancestry and culturally entrenched. In addition, Elders and ceremony were central to core program delivery and include exposing the Indigenous women to traditional teachings, Indigenous Pride, culture, and ceremony that many Indigenous women have lost touch with due to the intergenerational effects of colonization and Residential Schools.

In the role of IIC coordinator, Val initiated the proposal for W2B under the umbrella of the IIC. She ensured that EIFW's version of W2B differed from other programs across CSC to respond to the needs of the institution's

high Indigenous population (generally around 70%). As such, it made sense to ensure that the courses were always Indigenous developed, Indigenous led, and include Indigenous content. It was also imperative that knowledge keepers and Elder(s) participated as cultural advisors to engage in activities like ceremony, drumming circles, and language. Further, there is a goal for a minimum of 80% Indigenous enrollment. Incarcerated Indigenous women at EIFW and EIFW Elder Bonny Spencer were included in discussions about curriculum development. Then EIFW Warden Rob Campney gave approval to proceed and W2B university credit courses began at EIFW in September of 2019.

Bonny: At EIFW, we have the largest Indigenous population in Canada. Our maximum security is 95% Indigenous women, and in the general population, we're consistently at 60%. Historically, we had a low percentage of Indigenous women in minimum security. For many, their stay was relatively short, as they would transition to a Section 81 [from the 1992 *Corrections and Conditional Release Act*] healing lodge or halfway house. EIFW is the women's federal penitentiary for the whole prairie region, which includes the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta.

Indigenous women at EIFW are diverse; many are Cree, Saulteaux, Inuit, Dene, Blackfoot, and Métis. One focus is to teach our women how to celebrate that diversity and honour that diversity. And how to move forward and decolonize. I want these women to see themselves as the Eagles their grandmothers know them to be. Our women have to realize that they have an identity outside the prison institution. We need our [Indigenous] women out there in the real world. We don't need our women warehoused in institutions. They must step outside of the labels and define who they are as Indigenous women.

Indigenous pedagogies are crucial tools for Indigenous Peoples to relearn their identities outside of stereotypical colonial narratives. Prisons also impose a negative self-image on incarcerated people. The "We're Eagles, Not Chickens!" story highlights how Indigenous pedagogies can empower any student, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to reclaim one's identity separate from the prison or colonial gaze.

Sara: Bonny often speaks about expanding the idea of the "traditional healing path". This includes postsecondary courses because the content can

spark the imagination, but the process can also inspire a confidence and authority in the self. Our curricula are anti-colonial in the sense that they centre Indigenous created content and challenge the colonial lens that frame Indigenous Peoples as deficient, incapable victims. The stereotype of the incapable Indigenous person/nation serves the goal of settler-colonialism, which is to continually justify settler sovereignty over Indigenous Peoples and lands. We explore concepts and experiences through Indigenous authored art, films, comedy, literature, and scholarship. The material centres Indigenous worldviews, joy, lived experience, and theory to counter the common settler view that Indigenous is synonymous with trauma. Our courses provide a much-needed alternative to deficit-based programming, which dominates in settler institutions, including prisons.

Elders, like Bonny, offer classroom context, support, and knowledge outside of the expertise of the facilitators. Working together has been crucial. I imagine that some W2B instructors are curious about working with Elders, but may be concerned that Elder knowledge wouldn't be relevant if it's not an Indigenous Studies course. In my experience, there are common misconceptions about Elders that limit where their knowledge is sought and deemed legitimate or relevant. While there is no definitive definition of an Elder, a common characteristic is that their knowledge, experience, pedagogy, and community engagement make them a respected and acknowledged resource. Elders may run cultural ceremonies, but they are also keen intellectuals who apply their knowledge to diverse situations. Some Elders are more political, some are more ceremonial. While our work centres critical Indigenous Studies, it's not simply Indigenous subject matter that make Elders a valued asset to W2B courses. Chat with Elders about your course and be flexible with your syllabus because they may have suggestions that enrich the scope.

If you contact an Elder in the hopes of working together, know that they're often next-level busy. They're often running ceremonies, managing programs, and providing counsel to groups and individuals. They're resisting colonialism within their communities and assisting with the resurgence of their people. So, they're busy. They don't have time to teach you Indigenous 101. So, when you reach out, make sure you've done some homework. The Indigenous Canada MOOC and the UofA Faculty of Native Studies' micro-credential course *Countering Indigenous Stereotypes* are highly accessible courses that provide an excellent foundation. Take time to build

those relationships, get to know the Elders as people, their expertise, and what's important to them.

Come to the table with a willingness to use your resources to contribute to their work so you can build a relationship that's mutual. Go slow. Don't assume that this will be their priority. Ask if there's a protocol associated with working with them. If you're unsure, always ask. Open communication builds trust, which isn't just crucial for the students, but for the teaching and administrative teams. Avoid making promises that you can't keep like overcommitting; accept responsibility for mistakes; and be open to your work evolving as a result of that relationship.

As a non-Indigenous W2B facilitator, I hold these ethical and relational considerations very close. They anchor my motivation. Our ambitions extend beyond delivery of post-secondary classes. For the UWG and Elders like Bonny, demonstrating and teaching examples of Indigenous self-determination within prison walls contributes to larger Indigenous sovereignty movements because they counter harmful settler narratives and nurture anti-colonial wellbeing.

BEHIND THE SCENES

While some might see W2B as simply university classes where a faculty member and university-based students come in to teach for four months, there is so much work and organization behind each class that must happen in advance. Our success comes from the time and relationships that the UWG built inside EIFW to ensure that this W2B was helpful and reflected the unique learning and knowledge inside EIFW.

Sara: In addition to teaching W2B, I was also the administrative lead in developing the program at the UofA. While we don't have space to discuss our entire process, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was crucial to set a great foundation for the ethical direction of W2B in EIFW. For those who haven't yet gone through this process, W2B programs require an MOU between the post-secondary and correctional institutions. The MOU outlines the relationships, including liability, confidentiality, roles, and responsibilities. To prioritize anti-colonial knowledges, we wrote a clause requiring W2B facilitators from all disciplines to assign a majority of materials created by Indigenous, Black, and Peoples of Colour.

Bonny: With the support and push from Valerie Gow, we were able to build an Indigenous Intervention Centre. She had to get upper-level leadership to think outside the box, and once created, it opened the door to bring in relevant interventions to help Indigenous women. An important aspect to the centre was education. We need women to understand that education is our new buffalo. Education brings independence from poverty and they are able to move forward and grow. But when we can do things like university classes and normalize things, and get people connected to other like-minded people doing the same courses and those supports and resources out there. They can do it while they are on the inside, then the chances for success are far greater and to break that recidivism.

Savage: We cannot fool ourselves into thinking it was just our charm that had people joining W2B classes. It wasn't, well at least not entirely. People, like Bonny, extended their relationships of trust with people inside EIFW to encourage people to give us a chance. We didn't start off at EIFW with a full program of W2B courses; we built up to that. It was imperative that we not only build strong and respectful relationships with EIFW personnel, but also with our potential students. We had no reputation with anyone at EIFW to start, and it took dedicated time and energy to build up trust and confidence in our program and in us. Authentic relationships don't happen overnight!

Bonny: These classes aren't just about the education though. [Before W2B was a class at EIFW] Allison, Lisa and Savage ran some non-credit classes, and it allowed the women to build trust and confidence in the facilitators. Then with me there, it created a climate of familiarity. Some women have called this the "Kokum push". This work has to be continuous, rather than periodic because it helps us grow our relationships with the people within the institution.

Sandy: When I knew that you guys were going to be the instructors I wanted to apply. Because if you could sit through those little sessions with us [referring to the non-credit classes offered before W2B], I was sure you could sit through a class with us.

Bonny: I got asked a lot, "Do you know who these teachers [the W2B facilitators] are, Kokum?" The students trusted me and I trusted the UWG women.

Chantal: I can hear Kokum Bonny saying this to me, "Take a chance on yourself. Believe in yourself. You can do this". I remember so many times I was like F this, I can't do this. I want to quit. Or I would reassess my goals with Sara and be like I started with this goal. But you learn so much about yourself, and it removes the stigmas and labels of prison life – it adds normalcy to your life on the inside. Once a week you're meeting with these people in this room and they're human just like us. Those 15 people who would come inside every week and in our circle, and they would be vulnerable with us. They would be vulnerable with us and us with them. We were humans.

INDIGENOUS CIRCLE PEDAGOGY

Savage: Circle pedagogy or talking circles are a foundational approach to many Indigenous pedagogies. Talking circles allow participants an equal opportunity to speak and be heard in a respectful and attentive way. Talking circles were utilized to allow respectful dialogue and meaningful interaction. Individuals sit in a circle allowing participants to face each other. This model refuses a more hierarchical model by not having a 'head' of the classroom and allowing everyone to see each other's faces. Beginning at one person and moving left or right (depending on which Nation's land you're on – seek counsel from a knowledge keeper if you don't know), each person is given time and space to speak. Often there is an object – sometimes called a 'talking stick' that is handed around speaker to speaker. This could be an eagle feather, a shell, or even a simple rock. The person holding the talking stick is the only one speaking, everyone else is silent. A person can speak as long as they wish, without worry of schedules or timelines. If someone in the circle doesn't wish to speak, they simply pass the talking stick to the next person without judgment. Another important aspect of a circle is confidentiality and acceptance; anything said in the circle must remain in the circle. Finally, circles are finished when everyone has had at least one chance to speak, the talking stick can be passed around for more than one round.

For W2B, a program that integrates students from the outside and students from the inside, circle pedagogies are incredibly powerful. They encourage rotating leadership, community respect, and a shared responsibility. Talking circles have the potential to facilitate difficult conversations, and gain empathy and respect for others in the circle.

Bonny: Conventional education models have us lined up in rows of desks and people are looking at the back of each other's heads. For me teaching is an interchange and exchange of information and ideas and processing; it isn't just myself or a teacher up there spewing information and students writing it down. Every circle I'm a part of, I learn something new. Putting our own [Indigenous] history and the global picture into context of that history helps us understand the bigger picture. Everything I teach comes from a cultural perspective; even if I was teaching astrology it would be from a cultural point of view.

Lisa: For me, as an over-eager settler, the circle has been helpful in teaching me discipline in thought and challenges my perceived need to respond to everything. It teaches me to keep my brain still and allow myself time to process, and that quality can be better than quantity. Elder Bonny has shared how being in circle can be helpful for some to speak and for others to not speak – I am part of the latter group.

Sandy: I like that we learned in a circle, like every class was in a circle. Even if there was a desk between us it was still around a table and it was nice to learn from my fellow students that way.

Chantal: As an inside student, my support network started in that classroom, in that circle, in that safe place. Once a week you meet the same people in this room and they're human just like us. That's what I learned. Now, I talk about W2B all the time, how life changing it was for me and the support systems I made out of that. I'm still in contact with everybody, even Jennifer; she's not here but I talk to her all the time. My support network started in that circle. You'd find me in the same part of the circle every week because I never changed my seat. I did not change my seat. I was tucked away in the corner. I knew if I felt unsafe, I would just look around the circle at Kokum Bonny or look across at Sara. For me, W2B was life changing. Who would have thought? I took a university class inside a federal institution. It's amazing. And I challenged myself. Think outside the box, right? Something I'll never ever forget and I'm so grateful to be a part of it.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Savage: Some unsolicited advice to those who are uninitiated in the W2B framework, who are hearing about it for the first time, or who have been thinking about participating in this unique and powerful educational space. Step one, go to the W2B website and read all you can. There are amazing testimonials, art, and articles that will inspire you and impress upon you the importance of this work. From the moment I heard about this program I knew it was a place that would change lives. It changed mine.

Sandy: To my fellow students, "Don't miss out. Really. What did I say to Chantel?... 'You're not doing anything else'". I would tell others who were on the fence about W2B, "Well, you have nothing to lose. You're not doing anything, it's time to learn something".

Lisa: I love learning and want to help make spaces for other people who love learning to be able to do that. Collective, collaborative spaces of learning and thinking shouldn't just be for those who have time and money to spare – people who aren't positioned to live in survival mode. I want to be part of something that suspends time and place, even if for just a few hours a week. To be able to be a part-of and help with this brings me joy in ways nothing else can. As a white settler, when I'm in spaces that are rooted in Indigenous knowing, learning, and ceremony, it's important for me to continually check in to make sure that what I offer is helpful to the whole. If I don't do this, I risk taking more than I'm giving and this perpetuates settler power, which is especially reinforced in prison spaces.

Allison: I believe in the principles behind W2B and The Inside-Out Prison Exchange program: building bridges with people who are incarcerated, honouring students' lived knowledges as key to building a more just world, and learning that incorporates the whole self. However, my excitement and passion began with relationship building; talking and working with the friends from the Unruly Women's Group. This group shared a certain kind of joy for what we could do while we were planning. We argued and laughed, disagreed and bolstered one another, visited and planned logistics down to the smallest elements of a lesson plan. I believe that the fullness,

the excitement, and the care we developed for each other came into the classroom and helped make that space have warmth.

Sara: I'm reminded of a discussion about who 'belongs' in Indigenous Studies; Dr. Kim TallBear, a professor at the UofA's Faculty of Native Studies, argued that people who belong in Indigenous Studies are those who work towards Indigenous sovereignty. Full stop. In part, sovereignty means Indigenous peoples being in their communities, not filling colonial prisons. Those who need healing should have access so they can sit at decision making tables, contributing to the well-being of their nations, families, and selves. Centering anti-colonial education like critical Indigenous Studies within prisons helps combat the settler stereotype of Indigenous deficiency and criminality. The relationships that we've built doing this work have given me a space for growth, support, and laughter in my workplace. In a way, we act as the owl for each other, helping each other realize just how powerful and supported we are. And we get to share that teaching with students who teach us just as much.

Chantel: At first, I was like, "I can't do this. I want to quit". But I had supports. I can hear Kokum Bonny saying this to me, "Take a chance on yourself" or I would reassess my goals with Sara. I say to the reader, "Believe in yourself. You can do this". Also, the biggest part of my learning came from those 15 classmates of mine that came inside from the out. Take a chance on yourself and believe in yourself because I guarantee these people believe in you. They support you, they walk with you. Like I said, even when you leave that institution, they're still walking beside me and I'm forever grateful for that. Take a chance on yourself.

Savage: As spiritual beings having human experiences, we don't get to choose where or when we are born, and I don't think we get to choose our parents/caregivers either. But we do get to choose what we do with these human lives. I feel fortunate that my grandmother and mother made sure I knew my eagle roots. I've been in carceral spaces full of eagles who've been convinced they're chickens. There's transformative power in W2B that keeps me coming back to facilitate and support others to facilitate post-secondary courses inside these oppressive spaces. Naturally, the course content is important, but as my co-authors (aka co-conspirators) have stated, a W2B class relies as much upon its pedagogical practices as the content.

Informed and guided by Indigenous ontologies, decolonial practices, and circle pedagogical approaches, we learn about ourselves and those around us in a much more compelling and powerful way.

> Connection is the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.
>
> – Brown, 2021, page 170.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bonny Spencer is an Elder, Ceremonial Knowledge Keeper and former Social Worker who works within Edmonton Institution for Women. Bonny has worked with Walls to Bridges since its inception, and continues to lift up and support Indigenous women on their healing journeys.

Chantel Huel is a formerly incarcerated mother, grandmother, daughter, sister, partner, and friend. Chantel is currently on a journey to find greater balance and joy in her life and work by taking each day as it comes, and by using her voice and experiences to live honestly and with integrity.

Sandy Anderson is a former Walls to Bridges student and outspoken advocate for prison education. Armed with a wicked sense of humour and love of laughter, Sandy comes into W2B classes with positive energy.

Sara Howdle is a settler scholar from treaty-one territory and the Assistant Director of the McMaster Indigenous Research Institute. A long-time practitioner of anti-colonial education, Sara co-founded the W2B program at the Edmonton Institution for Women and is building a community education project at McMaster University in Hamilton.

Lisa Prins is the Project Manager for Humanities 101 at the University of Alberta and a social justice advocate. Lisa cofounded the Walls to Bridges program at Edmonton Institution for Women, and continues to volunteer and work to bring engaging programming to incarcerated folks.

Allison Sivak is a librarian who is one of five co-founders of the Greater Edmonton Library Association's Prison Libraries Project.

Savage Bear is a member of the Montreal Lake Cree Nation and a professor at McMaster University. Savage is the Director for McMaster Indigenous Research Institute and Co-Director for Walls to Bridges.