

# **Facilitating Group Discussion in Prison: Decolonizing, Destigmatizing and Egalitarian Approaches**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Drawing on literature from the fields of group dynamics and conflict resolution, this article provides direction and guidelines for prison group facilitators. We start by describing the institutional prison context, the multiple forms of violence in the Canadian prison system and the trauma of those who occupy it. Next, we examine the ways that groups are facilitated in the prison system, contrasting the colonial and cultural safety approaches, and highlighting our experiences in circle with the Walls to Bridges program. We explore the role of social identity in groups and consider mechanisms to build group cohesion. Ultimately, we offer potential facilitators tools and knowledge so that together we can work toward healing and transformation.

## **INTRODUCTION**

The incarcerated life is not easy. Popular rhetoric seems to imply that imprisoned people enjoy three-course meals, free healthcare, and plentiful access to cable television. Society says that we, incarcerated people, are not paying our debts to society and that we deserve to be punished and should suffer deprivations. Deprivations in the form of violence, along with emotional and mental struggles are indeed our reality (Freitas et al., 2014). In prison, violence is enacted by illicit groups, gangs bully and intimidate prisoners, and we witness violence, including murders. We experience debilitating judgement and are dehumanized through carceral processes. Amidst such violence, we join prison groups, some of which help us to feel human. Joining groups is a part of prison life. The groups in the prison system range from mandatory correctional programming groups to illicit groups to liberatory educational opportunities. In groups we find belonging, identity, social acceptance, security (and insecurity), and humanization (Litman & Paluck, 2015). In prison, some prisoners join groups of their own volition, while others are forced to join illicit groups or gangs for their own protection.

While gangs are the most obvious and perhaps the most violent group in prison life, there are also other types of groups. Peer support groups like

the Peer Offender Prevention Service (POPS) at Stony Mountain Institution (SMI) are composed of specially trained prisoners who respond to crises faced by their peers. This group offers emergency emotional care 24 hours a day (Walby & Cole, 2019). Religious, spiritual, and cultural groups also exist in the prison environment, as do groups organized by their work role in the institution. University educational programming offered through Walls to Bridges (W2B) at some Canadian penal institutions offers another type of group experience. Uplifting groups like W2B offer alternatives and may help imprisoned people “develop new, meaningful group membership and to reconnect with former social identities”, which may ultimately be “a highly effective reintegration strategy” (Littman & Paluck, 2015, p. 95). Restorative and hopeful groups are a potential peacebuilding tool in the prison environment.

To enable the peacebuilding potential of groups lies the art and skillful practice of group facilitation (Axner, 2017). Often people think that facilitating simply means setting an agenda, creating a PowerPoint, and helping participants to work through an agenda. However, a skillful facilitator learns environmental norms and pays attention to group dynamics to create spaces for learning and relating (Rothwell, 2021). Facilitation entails paying attention and attending to participants’ physical, emotional, relational, and intellectual needs. Well-facilitated and cohesive groups can create healthier alternatives.

As a result of participating in well-facilitated groups, we have experienced redemption, positive change, and even transformation in prison. The facilitation approach introduced to us during W2B courses offered through the University of Winnipeg is comprehensive, personal, and based on values of mutuality and respect. W2B is a unique Canadian offshoot of the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program based in the United States that was developed in the late 1990s. Like Inside-Out, W2B courses are university classes held in correctional facilities where student cohorts consist of an equal mixture of incarcerated students and university-based students (Kilty et al., 2020). As incarcerated persons, we have experienced this liberatory facilitation method through W2B where we feel valued, worthy, eager to grow, as both contributors and learners.

This article on group facilitation emerges from our study of group dynamics and facilitation during a Conflict Resolution Studies course entitled *Conflict within Groups*, which was offered through W2B at Stony

Mountain Institution in 2020-2021. In this class taught by phone,<sup>1</sup> two of us were inside students in the class and the third author was the course instructor. The original paper on which this article is based was our final class project, which the instructor indicated was worthy of publication. We have continued to revise our writing, reading more academic articles and learning about W2B scholarship. While at first we had hoped to include the perspective of another student, he was released and contact with him is prohibited. Instead, we co-wrote this article with our instructor with whom we met to discuss the article via phone and on a virtual platform on several occasions after the class ended. The instructor contributed by editing the paper and strengthening the article's argument with additional scholarship on violence and group dynamics. With the exception of Jodi's section on teaching a W2B class, this article is written from our perspective as inside students with experience, knowledge, and ideas about how to make prison groups transformational experiences.

As we move forward to illustrate our ideas about life-affirming prison groups, we identify facilitation practices to help potential facilitators to consider attitudes and approaches that may contribute to positive change in the lives of those in prison. First, we unpack the realities and insights emanating from our experiences with systemic and interpersonal violence, as well as our educational experiences with the W2B program.

## **VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA**

Violence or intentional harm is multifaceted and impacts humanity on a multitude of levels – physical, mental, emotional, and psychological. Violence can be aimed directly or indirectly at a person or group through practices and policies intended to prioritize the wellbeing of one group or persons above another (Galtung, 1969). In a prison environment, the trilateral complexity of Galtung's direct, structural, and cultural violence are present. Direct violence comes in the form of punishing physical, emotional, and psychological practices or neglect from within the prison system. When powerful groups control certain areas of the prison and harm those who try to bypass boundaries, direct violence occurs. The structural component of prison violence includes environmental policies and realities, failing infrastructure, overcrowding and the general lack of capacity of prisons to care for the physical and mental wellbeing of prisoners (Ling, 2021; Mussie

et al., 2021). In fact, Canadian prisons are extremely dangerous for those within them and have homicide rates twenty times higher than the city of Toronto (Ling, 2021). Denis Mutz is the most recent prisoner whose death in custody at Stony Mountain Institution remains unexplained (Correctional Service Canada, 2022).

In the prison context, illicit groups increase violence. Litman and Paluck (2015) explain that violence operates methodically and is used to facilitate group members' connection to their faction. As they write, "engaging in violent behaviour increases identification with one's violent group, leading to a cycle of violence in which group identification increases willingness to engage in violent behaviour and perpetrating violence increases group identification" (ibid, p. 81). Prison gangs are often affiliated with gangs on the outside of an institutional context. On the inside they control prison corridors, regulate flows of drugs and other contraband, and provide and collect loans (Weinrath, 2016). In fact, prison gangs govern many aspects of life on the inside, utilizing violence and the threat of violence to maintain control (Delisi et al., 2004). Individual members of illicit groups may use violence to move up the gang hierarchy and to increase group cohesiveness (Littman & Paluck, 2015).

While academic literature on violence helps explain the context in which we live, we would also like to illustrate how violence has emerged in our lives. In this section, we invite consideration of some of the multiple traumas and violence that we have seen and experienced over the last 15 years. We also unpack our understandings of violence that have emerged from these experiences.

### **An Account from Tam**

Over the years I have been incarcerated, I have seen and faced a lot of violent conflicts. I have tried my best to mediate the conflicts that I have faced. Most of these violent conflicts have been unforgettable. I cannot un-see what I saw. They stick in the back of my mind and heighten my feelings of fear, paranoia, guilt, and sorrow. I wish I could list all the conflicts that haunt me, but then this essay would be more than fifty pages. Instead, I will share two conflicts that weigh heavily.

1. I continue to live the trauma of my offence. I pulled the trigger and I watched the bullets enter my victim's body. He froze and it was as

if I saw his life leave his body before my own eyes. I hated myself because my cowardly actions cost him his life. It was a senseless altercation that destroyed so many lives and for which I feel I can never forgive myself.

2. As a peer worker in the POPS program, I worked with Antony<sup>2</sup> for about a year. He was starting to do really well as we found methods and tools to help alleviate his grief, anxiety, and despair. He came clean about his crime and would no longer lie about his offense, which seemed to free him from the weight of what he had done. Nonetheless things took a turn for the worst for Antony. I got called to his range<sup>3</sup> in the middle of the night. I went down and was immediately welcomed by the staff when I saw a young prisoner, Jon, looking very distraught. As I approached Jon, the look on his face frightened me. I intuitively knew something horrible must have happened. I soon found out that Antony was murdered just hours before this encounter. As I sat and counselled this young prisoner for hours after he had experienced the trauma of witnessing the murder, staff carried the lifeless body in front of the entire range to await the coroner. It seems that another prisoner had sharpened a hairbrush and stabbed Antony in the neck, which resulted in his death. I still beat myself up for not being there that night. I would like to imagine that I could have stopped and possibly prevented his death, as well as Jon's trauma.

### **An Account from Nate**

I will never forget my daily thoughts when I was in Edmonton maximum-security prison. Violence took place all around me, and there were constant rumblings and rumours of more violence. The fear of violence and actual violence made each day hard to bear. One unforgettable day my close friend made a harmless and seemingly innocent gesture by cheering for a winning football team. Another man who was living on the range with us interpreted this cheer as a personal attack since he was cheering for the opposite team. Enraged and red-faced, this man said he was going to stab my friend. At that moment, I did not know what to do so I tried to remain calm and let this individual vent his feelings. I remember fearfully praying and hoping that nothing would happen to my friend or me. Thankfully my prayer was answered with the help of a positive individual – Tam was there and able to de-escalate the situation. Tam reassured the furious individual and his posse

that neither I nor my friend meant him nor anyone else harm. Thankfully, this situation was mediated and no violence was inflicted on my friend nor me.

Another time in Edmonton Max, I was playing basketball on one side of the gym with a couple other guys. Something that day did not feel right. The tension was palpable and when I looked over, I noticed ten guys surrounding one man in the opposite corner of the gym. While at first it seemed they only wanted to talk to him, the violent assault began minutes later. The man screamed and pleaded for his life, a wailing that I will never forget. There was so much blood. The guards finally came and wheeled him to the hospital. A lot of those nights in Edmonton, I prayed that I would die in my sleep because the thought of being murdered in prison was becoming too hard for me to bear.

## **EXAMINING OUR EXPERIENCES WITH VIOLENCE**

As we examine our stories of trauma and violence, we come to several different realizations about the role of violence in our lives and our desire to move from violence to positive social change. We know that we are capable of inflicting violence. We see how violence multiplies in prisons, hides in corners, and often emerges. We know that violence impacts not just those who engage in it, but those who witness fights, assaults, and murders. Violence is not just one incident that happens and is forgotten, it is something that continues to have an impact on us; violence is traumatic and we live with this trauma daily. We also see the destructiveness of violent attacks on solitary individuals without advocates or aligning groups. While it would seem obvious that aligning with a group would have provided us each with group protection from the kind of violence that we have seen, we have chosen not to side with a gang. We see how gangs operate and feel the terror of their governance. Ultimately, we have a healthy fear of violence and seek ways to avoid it. We also hold hope in contrast to violence. We hope to be equipped and present to stop violence.

Daily exposure to direct, structural, and cultural violence wreaks havoc on prisoners and the prison environment. In order to combat direct and cultural violence, peer and learning groups offer alternatives, providing imprisoned people with opportunities to feel their humanity, gain skills, and seek redemption.

## **FACILITATION IN THE PRISON CONTEXT**

As we establish our vision of healthy facilitated groups, let us consider some important prison ground rules and norms. Group norms – that is the ways that people are expected to behave in groups and how members know the difference between right and wrong – regulate a group’s interactions allowing for fairer communication and maintaining respect among members (Levi, 2014). Group norms are created by members or imposed by outside structures and can be violated or altered (Rothwell, 2021). In the following discussion of environmental and group norms, we identify unique norms characterizing prison culture.

Prison culture differs from the outside world. What constitutes respect on the outside is not the same on the inside. Being a nice guy in prison does not yield respect; instead, respected prisoners are visibly tough, violent, or able to supply illicit things. Disrespect can unleash violence. Many prisoners are pessimistic and have a negative outlook on life. They are accustomed to using violence if they are insulted or disrespected, making life in prison an explosive environment.

Many groups in prison are characterized by a colonial authoritarian approach. A colonial authoritarian approach is a power-over tactic wielded by those with institutional power – correctional officers and facilitators. Pollack and Edwards (2018, p. 314) describe this domination approach to programming within prisons where a facilitator is seen as a commander.

Correctional programming is typically cognitive-behavioural, explicitly designed to change thinking patterns and behaviours considered to be criminogenic. The facilitator is considered the expert on the material and the very purpose of such program is to impact/change participants selves.

In authoritarian approaches, the facilitator acts as a sagacious leader directing prisoners to change behaviour through prescribed measures. However, this imposing approach loses sight of cultural teachings, empathy, and humanization, while also failing to see incarcerated persons as fully human and as citizens, taxpayers, mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, sons, or daughters. A colonial approach to groups is ultimately ineffective in humanizing persons.

To contrast our description of colonial approaches where the power is utilized by an authority, we propose ground rules or norms for potential prison group facilitators where power is shared. In order to share power, it is important not to ask a prisoner about their offence, especially in the company of others. This question is not only private, but it can also lead the individual to feel condemnation and shame, particularly amongst their fellow peers. People in prison are often identified by their index offence in a hierarchy of prison criminality. Sex offenders are considered the most vile, while murderers are respected. Nonetheless, calling a prisoner by their index offense is a power-over tactic. Another ground rule is to refrain from staring at imprisoned people. When people stare at others in the prison context, prisoners feel threatened, judged, and confused. Threatening behaviours like staring and intimidation are used by high-ranking gang members to command status and respect. Thus, a facilitator who stares is communicating a higher power status.

We also propose norms for shared power in communication. Assertive communication is not necessarily productive in a prison group environment – assertiveness in prison is often viewed as aggression. When a person of authority assertively communicates to a prisoner in front of their peers, negative emotions can escalate within the group context, leaving that individual feeling belittled and weak. If a prisoner does not react, then others will see this person as weak and will try to control them.

The key rule to remember in regard to how to interact and approach a prisoner is to *come to the group as an equal*. This is another invitation to reduce power differentials. As a facilitator, it is important to communicate a nonjudgmental and non-saviour-like attitude. The primary and guiding purpose of facilitators must be to learn and to grow with others. If facilitators are coming to a prison group to teach, prisoners will lose interest. Imprisoned people are used to being told what to do and what not to do, so having another group where relationships are structured and dependent on powerful divides of giver versus receiver or the saved versus the damned do not work.

## **BUILDING MODELS FOR GROUP FACILITATION IN PRISON**

Group facilitation includes countless tasks geared to creating a healthy, productive environment. Facilitators attend to environmental, relational, and



intellectual needs during a meeting. To attend to the physical environment, facilitators schedule breaks, consider room temperature, and arrange the set-up of chairs, tables, and snacks. To attend to the relational needs of a group, facilitators create opportunities for relationship building, while steering conversation toward stated meeting objectives. A group's goals are varied and may include socializing, specific knowledge, decision-making, baking a pie, or even finishing a puzzle. The intellectual environment that a facilitator helps to create also impacts participants. The intellectual environment is perhaps understood as making spaces for exploration, questions, participant confusion, and brilliance. The relational and productive environment that a facilitator fashions is important.

Different facilitation methods can lead to shifts in power dynamics and a redistribution of power to those who perceive themselves as weaker members of a group. Relationship building and healthy communication through ice breakers, deep sharing and caring, the perceptive way that facilitators face ethical dilemmas, and the use of circles are a few ways to create more parity.

Icebreakers are powerful contributors to group processes. Icebreakers lessen feelings of unfamiliarity and shyness, build a sense of being part of a team, create networking opportunities, and help participants to share skills and experiences (Freitas et al., 2014). In our experience through W2B, icebreakers make a chaotic prison environment more intimate and personal, allowing us to feel like we are part of the community, rather than in prison. An inside participant from Inside-Out echoes our experience with relationship building at the start of meetings.

The opening exercises allowed each person to get a glimpse into others' humanity. Labels such as inmate and student fell away and were irrelevant. We were just people engaging each other on a basic human level (Pompa, 2002, p. 68).

Deep sharing as modeled by the facilitator invites deep sharing from others. For example, if facilitating a mental health group, a facilitator who shares some of their own mental health struggles may help to bring others into the conversation. Secondly, a facilitator may encourage others to share as they are comfortable. We also encourage facilitators to use communication techniques like summary statements and paraphrases to help group members

to feel understood and on somewhat of an equal sharing level. Furthermore, demonstrating care and appreciation may allow an imprisoned person's confidence and self-worth to grow. Gass and colleagues (2016, p. 415) explain that compassion shown by leaders can help participants to "develop a positive frame of mind about themselves... [so that they] want to become successful, and begin valuing peace as a necessary condition for that to happen". We know that when facilitators care about us and demonstrate that care by sharing and listening, we see our greater potential.

Facilitators face ethical dilemmas with explosive potential when working with groups in the prison environment. An ethical dilemma emerges when a facilitator feels doubt about how to act in relation to a group's values, norms, and obligations. Warfield (2002, p. 217) described how ethical dilemmas emerge from different contexts, writing: "ethical perspectives are social constructions that vary across cultures. A certain behaviour occurring in conflict situations may seem as quite appropriate and justifiable to individuals or groups who come from a different culture". As facilitators face ethical dilemmas in the violent environment of the prison, it is important to get some space away; immediately pause, reflect, and then privately discuss issues with prisoners by approaching conflicts in a positive manner. Pollack and Edwards (2018, p. 311), drawing from Parker Palmer, advise the use of "communication about reflection, collaboration and listening rather than explaining, advising or helping". Likewise, facilitators should avoid becoming defensive when a group member disagrees or challenges their opinion. Defensiveness may cause prisoners to harbour resentment and doubt or be perceived as aggressive. Thus, facing ethical dilemmas in a prison setting requires structured, compassionate, and empathetic responses.

Another facilitation method that shares power and builds trust is the circle. Circles, also known as sharing circles, circles of trust, and learning circles, value participants. In learning circles, participants sit or stand in the shape of a circle, listen to others, and have a choice of speaking when it is their turn. As all participants have a chance to listen and to speak, circles build relationships and trust within a group. Circles are central to the W2B program and especially relevant in the prison educational community and correctional programming.

Circles emerge from Indigenous ways of teaching and relating. A conductor is the facilitator of a circle and ensures the creation of a safe environment where participants can share (Kilty et al., 2020). Circles

illustrate power-sharing and include “an anti-oppression framework that destabilizes hierarchical power relations and structures” (ibid, p. 97). Scholars and participants in W2B explain that circles are beneficial as they act inclusively, emphasize respect, and offer security (Fayter, 2016; Freitas et al., 2014; Pollack, 2016; Kilty et al., 2020).

In addition to operating a circle for relationship building and learning, group consensus can also be reached using circles. Open and supportive communication through group consensus in a circle is an effective method of decision-making and problem-solving in groups. As O’Connell and Cuthertson (2009, p. 76) note: “The consensus-building process promotes the effective and efficient use of all the resources the group has available, including knowledge and experience and constructive conflict resolution”. Thus, group facilitators may want to utilize circles to build relationships, deliberate decisions, reduce power differentials, and ultimately to work toward healing.

A facilitator’s approach to guiding groups can lead to transformation and self-understanding of participants. A commitment to sharing power, being guided by emotional intelligence, utilizing healthy communication tools and implementing circles bring participants into safer spaces of conversation.

## **PRACTICAL GUIDELINES FOR GROUP FACILITATION**

As we consider the role of the facilitator, we recognize the multiple levels of responsibility for facilitators to guide participants. As Fritz (2014, p. 151) explains:

[Facilitators] listen, encourage participation, draw out opinions of participants, ask questions, clarify communication, keep a meeting on task, guide the group through difficult discussions, test assumptions, are optimistic, give as well as receive feedback, while having no substantive decision-making authority and periodically summarize progress.

Facilitators pay attention to task and relational responsibilities. In order to remember some of the most important guidelines for facilitators of groups within a medium- or maximum-security prison, we offer the following suggestions.

- Arrive at least 30 minutes earlier than the initial meeting. Prisoners tend to come early for meetings. Security issues emerge if imprisoned people hang out and linger in the hallways. This extra time gives facilitators the opportunity to set up, create name tags, and prepare for the group.
- Welcome and thank everyone for being in the circle. Introduce yourself and then invite the introductions of others. Use name tags to create a more personal experience.
- Discuss and establish group norms and ground rules as a consensus-building activity.
- Facilitate relationship building through icebreakers.
- Share deeply from your experience to foster deep sharing from others.
- Facilitate participatory small group activities. Avoid lengthy readings to keep everyone engaged.
- Utilize breaks for decompression and relief. The breaks also allow for additional interpersonal interactions, while enjoying some possible snacks and beverages.
- Invite individual follow-ups after the meeting to continue creating openness and vulnerability.
- Close the meeting or circle meaningfully. One idea is to have participants share a word that describes how they feel or to share for a minute or two about their group experience.

## **WALLS TO BRIDGES**

The W2B group meetings under the direction of skillful facilitators have had a positive impact on our sense of self-worth. In W2B we feel human; facilitators and participants refer to us as friends, students, and scholars, not as prisoners or numbers. As W2B instructors guide learning through circles, facilitate activities intended to build trust, and provide hands-on activities, we encounter difference and learn to deal with it. Through this process of learning we have gained confidence, self-worth, and are given the chance to become good role models for our peers, as our facilitators were to us.

We know that we are not the only ones who have found humanization through W2B and offer the personal testimony of an incarcerated female W2B student:

Being imprisoned, I was stripped of my identity labelled as an offender, and forced to silence my opinions or risk repercussions. But within the W2B circle I was a student in sharing my beliefs, and was able to reclaim my voice (Kilty et al., 2020, p. 99).

Prison facilitators who create a positive social environment encourage prisoners and help them inherit pro-social characteristics. In the next section, Jodi explores how she utilized the W2B facilitation model to create a positive social environment characterized by healthy interpersonal relationships and learning.

### **An Account from Jodi**

In the summer of 2019, I (Jodi) attended the W2B's instructor training in Grand Valley Institution in Kitchener, Ontario. Upon entering the classroom where the W2B training took place, I was impressed by the attention to detail, the participatory facilitation methods, and the confident preparation of inside students, outside students, and instructors. I felt welcomed, cared for, and integral to the learning process. I observed the sharing of power among facilitators, the planned design of a participatory learning circle (Pollack & Edwards, 2018; Sferraza 2018), and deep sharing from group leaders (Kilty et al., 2020; Fayter, 2016). I experienced W2B's intentional facilitation method based on Indigenous knowledge and a focus on relationships, which valued student knowledge and experience in the classroom. When I tried to put these values and methods to work in my own W2B course, I had to adapt to a very different environment and set-up.

In late summer 2020, I was asked to teach a W2B course during the first fall of the COVID-19 pandemic. I thought it was a distance education course where the majority of learning and relationship building were to take place via written communication. However, an opportunity arose to teach this course over the phone, which offered more direct communication with students. I quickly developed the course for the unique W2B context of fall 2020 where no outside students would be in the class and I would facilitate learning via phone. I consulted my colleagues and literature from W2B training to remind me of W2B's pedagogical commitments and methods. I invited students to sit in a circle near to the phone. We started each class with a question that all would answer around the circle. As I recognized that students needed to know me in order to trust what I had to offer, I joined

in by answering these weekly questions. On many occasions, I spoke of my wife and son, and felt vulnerable to discuss my family structure and family life with men separated from their immediate families. Leaning into vulnerability, deep sharing became a hallmark of this course.

With a commitment to W2B pedagogy, I structured 75-minute classes by starting and ending with a circle. I also facilitated activities to engage students physically as is common in W2B. One successful activity involved inviting students to make paper airplanes to fly information to students on the other side of the room and then inviting them to crush the airplanes. On the other end of the phone, I heard paper being removed from binders, excited voices shaping airplanes, and then the crunch of papers. In that moment, I realized that students trusted me enough to engage in an activity that I could not see. Students seemed to enjoy active learning.

I used all my available senses in the phone class, which meant that I was often sore and exhausted after class. I would sit rigidly at my basement desk clutching my cell phone to my ear for 75 minutes and taking copious notes of student input. I know that I missed a lot of nuance in the learning environment as sound from landline speaker phones in a room where people have to social distance is an environmental challenge. Furthermore, I could not see how students reacted physically to what I or others were saying. Paying attention to students and focusing on their learning is generally a W2B characteristic and was a challenge in this class.

I learned early on that I was missing other contextual knowledge and had to depend both on the propriety of educational officers in a colonial institution and also on students. Having never been to SMI, I did not know if the classroom had a door that could shut, if the room was located close to other offices, or if anyone could overhear what students said. In order to receive students' written work, I depended on a correctional officer in the Education Department who scanned papers and sent them to me. The education officer could read those papers if they chose. I could only get in touch with students through an officer. Ultimately, I had to utilize the colonial prison system to accomplish something very different – a liberatory educational space.

It was the students' educational commitment and our relationship which further allowed this class to flourish, and become transformational in my life and some of theirs. I found that students' desire to learn was bountiful – a longing that exceeded that of other students with whom I had worked. The

use of circle learning where all contribute meaningfully, sharing control of the classroom space, experiencing the giftedness of students, using games and activities, and validating the experience of students allowed me to build relationships with the five inside students in this class. The opportunity to develop relationships with these students who want to learn and to give back to their communities and intimate knowledge of the controlled prison environment are two of the gifts I received as a result of facilitating this class. I join with Tam and Nate in wanting to help other potential facilitators to heed the calls they have identified and to create life-changing possibilities with prison groups.

## CONCLUSION

As W2B students in the prison system, we know that effective positive social groups help prison group members establish a sense of self-worth and an efficient new outlook on life. In prison where we are surrounded by violence and illicit activities, we have found refuge and solace in a W2B group. We want the well-intentioned potential facilitators that come into prison outside of W2B to gain knowledge of prison norms and facilitation tools, and ultimately create productive experiences.

Creating a constructive and receptive learning environment in prison is essential. Group facilitators in prison must understand prisoner behaviour and prison group dynamics, and facilitate as both a listener and a learner. Arriving and being present as an equal member of the circle will create a potentially transformative experience where participants feel human and can identify themselves as more than their offence. We hope these guidelines on group facilitation within prisons can be helpful to those both inside and outside the walls.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In the fall of 2020, W2B Winnipeg was unable to teach inside and outside students in person due to the pandemic. This class was composed of inside students only. The class was intended to be taught in the fall semester only, however, the class was extended through the winter semester as pandemic restrictions made it difficult for SMI students to gather in person.
- <sup>2</sup> All names used in this paragraph are pseudonyms.
- <sup>3</sup> Cell block or living unit.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

*Tam Le* is thankful for the Walls to Bridges program and Stony Mountain for his education. He hopes to get a bachelor’s degree in a helping field and find belonging in community. Tam’s journey has helped him to realize the importance of sharing and accepting compassion and wisdom. Tam vows to be part of the solution and a positive role model to others who wish to listen.

*Nathanael Plourde* is a committed learner on a journey of transformation. He is thankful to be alive, sorrowful for acts committed, and grateful for the liberty he feels although still in prison. Nate moves forward supported by his family and community, and by sharing his story and the love that he has received with those around him.

*Jodi Dueck-Read* is a seeker of justice and in her journey appreciates meeting people with different life experiences. Recently, she facilitated a class over the phone with the Walls to Bridges program at Stony Mountain. In this class, she learned with and from co-authors, as well as fantastic group facilitators, Tam and Nate.