

Metamorphosis Inside and Out: Transformative Learning at Portland State University

Vicki L. Reitenauer, Katherine Elaine Draper-Beard, and Noah Schultz

Abstract

In this article, the authors (a faculty member and two former students) describe the trajectory that Portland State University has taken over its history to institutionalize transformative learning opportunities within its comprehensive general education program, University Studies. Following a description of the institutional changes that resulted in the community-based, experientially focused courses at the heart of University Studies, the authors explore one particular community partnership involving both a state agency and the national Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, dedicated to offering transformative experiences in which incarcerated and non-incarcerated students learn together inside correctional facilities. Finally, each author shares a reflective essay about the personal transformation experienced through these Inside-Out courses and the implications of these changes on their lives.

Keywords: community-based learning; community engagement; general education; prison education; service learning

Introduction

Portland State University (PSU), with its motto “Let Knowledge Serve the City,” has built a reputation over the past two decades as a national leader in community-based and service learning. This mission dates from PSU’s founding in 1946 as the Vanport Extension Center to serve GIs returning from World War II in an area built to house shipyard workers in wartime (Portland State University 2018). It developed further under the 1990-1997 presidency of Judith Ramaley, who understood the responsibility of the urban access university to be of a “distinctive institutional type... characterized by the nature and extent of its responsiveness to the research and educational needs of complex metropolitan regions” (Ramaley 1996, 139). It would be a place where faculty, students, and community partners would collaborate both to provide unparalleled learning opportunities for students while also offering “a vehicle for the university to respond more effectively to societal demands” (Ramaley 1996, 140).

Among the institutional transformations that resulted from Ramaley’s presidency, and a key driver of continuing institutional and cultural change at PSU and the recognition that has resulted from it, has been University Studies, the comprehensive general education program. PSU implemented this program in 1994, after a collaborative redesign process led by a group of faculty studying best practices in general education, as charged by the University’s administrative leadership. This faculty working group consulted the work of Alexander Astin (1992, 1993) on the importance of student and faculty contact, peer-to-peer learning, active learning, and community-based learning for students’ success, along with the then-current literature on student access to, and retention in, higher education. Further, members of the committee met with Portland-area employers in the public and private sectors to understand

more deeply the fundamental skills and capacities they expected PSU graduates to bring into their workplaces. These employers regularly noted that graduates had developed significant bases of knowledge in particular subject areas, but that they were also lacking in their capacities to function effectively in interpersonal and team contexts across disciplinary lines (White 1994).

Following its year of study, the faculty working group proposed a four-year general education program centered on inquiry, interdisciplinary teaching and learning, application of theory in practice, and the development of the habits of lifelong learning. Components of this model include Freshman Inquiry, a first-year theme-based course in which 36 students build a learning community over the course of the academic year while also engaging in 12-person sections of mentored inquiry led by an upper-division peer mentor. Sophomore Inquiry consists of single-term inquiry-based courses centering on knowledge domains. Students then choose to specialize in discipline-specific courses in the Junior Cluster that follows one of their Sophomore Inquiry courses. Finally, the Senior Capstone, a 6-credit service-learning course, involves students in interdisciplinary teams working on a project in reciprocal relationship with a partnering community organization. In fall term of 1993, the PSU Faculty Senate voted to adopt this University Studies program. In 1994, multi-disciplinary teams of PSU faculty taught the first Freshman Inquiry themed first-year courses (University Studies 1998). By 1995, the first Capstone senior-level service-learning courses got underway. More than twenty years later, University Studies continues to evolve and adapt to meet the needs of PSU's increasingly diverse student body (Kerrigan, 2016).

University Studies and the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program

Since its inception, University Studies has invested in the development of mutually beneficial community partnerships. It has recruited and empowered its faculty to design courses that create the possibility for transformation on the personal, the interpersonal, and the community level. Among these partnerships has been a connection with both the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program and the Oregon Department of Corrections, in whose correctional facilities University Studies offers junior- and senior-level University Studies courses grounded in the Inside-Out model.

Founded at Temple University in 1997, the now-nationwide Inside-Out Prison Exchange program situates college-level courses within correctional facilities to allow incarcerated and non-incarcerated students to learn from and with each other through dialogue, perspective-sharing, and collaborative project work. As the Inside-Out website asserts,

Higher education and corrections are among the most powerful institutions in the world today...Individuals in both systems can often feel alienated, objectified, and pessimistic about the possibility of social change...The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program recognizes the social isolation that systems of correction and higher education can produce...Inside-Out is a form of education that enables incarcerated and non-incarcerated people to encounter one another as human beings. Dialogue across social barriers is transformative and allows problems to be approached in new and different ways. The emphasis on collaborative learning invites people on both sides of prison walls

to take leadership in addressing crime, justice, and other issues of social concern. (The Inside-Out Center, 2018)

Inside-Out courses operate inside correctional facilities, with an equivalent number of incarcerated (“inside”) students and non-incarcerated (“outside”) students. For both inside and outside students, there is a boundary crossing at the heart of the endeavor, an encounter with “the other” that occurs on multiple levels. Class sessions involve a high degree of interaction, with dialogue and discussion happening at the levels of both large and small groups, and are marked with a palpable internal dynamism that results from such engagement.

Drawn to the vision of the Inside-Out program, PSU Community Research and Partnerships Director, Amy Spring, participated in the weeklong Inside-Out training required for all instructors working with the model in the early 2000s. Following this training in Philadelphia, Ms. Spring returned to Oregon and began developing a partnership with the Oregon Department of Corrections (DOC). Over the course of several years of work, invested in strengthening ties between Oregon educational institutions (including the University of Oregon, Oregon State University, Lewis and Clark College, and Clackamas Community College) and the DOC, Ms. Spring and her colleagues at PSU and beyond began offering Inside-Out courses at a number of adult and juvenile correctional facilities in Oregon.

Ms. Spring designed and taught the first Inside-Out offering at PSU, Capstone course in 2006, and continuing at present. Called “The Inside-Out Capstone,” the course focuses on leadership and civic engagement and grounds itself on the fundamental Inside-Out methodology, a set of processes that prioritize dialogue, collaboration, and other learner-centered strategies. Additional Inside-Out Capstone courses followed (including “Metamorphosis,” discussed below), taught by additional PSU instructors trained in the Inside-Out methodology. Courses offered by the departments of Criminology and Criminal Justice, English, and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies followed. Of these departmental courses, several, including “Writing as Activism,” discussed below, also fulfill the general education Junior Cluster requirement.

The Transformative Power of Inside-Out

In the following sections, the authors introduce you to two Inside-Out courses offered for general education credit at PSU: “Writing as Activism: An Inside-Out Course,” a departmental offering in Women, Gender, and Sexualities studies that fulfills a University Studies cluster requirement, and “Metamorphosis: Creating Positive Futures—Inside-Out at McLaren Youth Correctional Facility,” a senior Capstone service-learning course. In the junior-level “Writing as Activism” course, participants work intensively to develop their writing, individually and in connection with others, reading a variety of texts from a diverse range of authors, generating new writing in co-facilitated weekly writing workshops, serving as writing coaches with each other, and working collaboratively on a final project. The learning objectives for “Writing as Activism” include the following:

- Create and maintain a collaborative and mutually beneficial environment, and reflect on our successes and failures as a collaborative learning community;

- Practice claiming—our educations, our choices, our voices, our words, our lives—both in and out of our classroom;
- Explore the places in which the solitary act of taking words out of our heads and putting them on the page intersect with the public act of using language to communicate with others;
- Recognize how each of us might choose to engage in activist practice through the mechanism of writing, as a tool for amplifying our individual voices, and for making social change in our spheres of influence and beyond;
- Act—through engaging as authors of our own work, as supporters of others’ writing, and as collaborators with each other on a community-based, writing-involved project.

The course description for “Metamorphosis” similarly addresses the changes that students will explore in and through the course:

How do I transform my own life? How do I transform my community and the world? This course provides an opportunity for a small group of students from PSU and a small group of students incarcerated at MacLaren Youth Correctional Facility (MYCF) to work together in a structured peer and collaborative learning environment to address these questions. Each week, 12 PSU students and 12 incarcerated young men will meet at MYCF...Students (both outside PSU and inside students) will examine their own perceptions about personal and social transformation, and examine and develop their perceptions of themselves as agents of change. Together we will study historical and contemporary examples that will help us understand personal transformation and social change. Participants will have the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of a variety of social justice issues through readings, film and discussion. Additionally, as a whole group, students will decide upon and complete a community-based learning project, addressing a social justice issue agreed upon by the participants. All students (inside and outside) will have equal ownership of and participation in the project, and will thus contribute to the positive transformation of themselves, their community and the world. (University Studies, 2018)

In the following section, a sample the student authors reflects on the transformative nature of their encounters through their Inside-Out experiences and the implications of the change they experienced in their lives going forward.

The Transformation, Reflected

“‘Your One Wild and Precious Life’”: Katherine Elaine Draper Beard, outside student, “Writing as Activism: An Inside-Out Course,” and teaching assistant, “Inside Out Prison Exchange: Grant Writing for Civic Leadership”

I wasn’t expecting to see them there, nestled in the grass. Impervious to the twenty-foot fence crowned with razor wire, their tiny noses twitched as they scrutinized us. “Wild baby bunnies!” a hushed voice exclaimed. I straggled behind the group as we moved toward the guard tower, unable to drag my eyes away from their small, still forms, seemingly so out of place. I felt

equally alien inside the stark prison, too brightly colored against the gray, blue, and white. Once inside, we found the muted beige classroom and paraded awkwardly into the circle of chairs. The collective trepidation eased as we introduced ourselves. My sense of anxious apartness melted away as together we read aloud Mary Oliver's (1990) *The Summer's Day*:

Who made the world?
Who made the swan, and the black bear?
Who made the grasshopper?
This grasshopper, I mean--
the one who has flung herself out of the grass,
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down--
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life? (Oliver, 1990, p. 60)

I settled into the routine, eagerly awaiting this class and lamenting how quickly the hours passed. My classes on the Portland State campus began to feel monotonous, and I commenced a critical survey of disparities between them. It was not the lack of windows, or the security measures, or more industrious students; it was a sense of community and camaraderie, a shared consciousness of the value of our time together, and the weight of it.

In his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, a cardinal text of critical pedagogy, Paulo Freire writes; "Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 2000, p. 72). Traditional pedagogic indoctrination taught me to memorize and regurgitate, rarely to absorb and apply, engendering minimal curiosity. But each week passing through the sinister prison gates, stepping onto soil distinctly no longer the land of the free, I rediscovered the significance of education pursued for its own sake, not merely in pursuit of degrees and accolades. In ten short weeks we as a class examined what we knew about crime, justice, rehabilitation, and recidivism and took accountability for our erroneous ideas. We sought the political in each of our personal stories, and endeavored to put our experience into words. Cautiously, we shared our writings, and we laughed together. Judgment and prejudice receded as compassion and understanding grew. Independently and together, we revised our ideas.

There is no answer key or solutions manual for the acquisition of knowledge. Questioning systems of domination, scouring our oppression-rooted beliefs and practices for inconsistencies

and inaccuracies isn't easy. However, liberation from domination requires us to have sovereignty over our own thinking, to become introspective thinkers who can systematically scrutinize our culture and passionately strive towards personal and political progress. It is the essential and extraordinary power of transformative education to unshackle us--inmates, students, and professors--to enable us to be independent scholars, and to honestly ask ourselves "what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?" (Oliver, 1990, p. 60)

"Resistance and Healing": Noah Schultz, inside student, [Metamorphosis]

My fingers scratched anxiously at the loose tape holding my notebook together. I had waited months for this class to start. The radio on the staff's hip shouts out words dressed in static. Every ear in the room perks up waiting for notification of the students entering the facility. One of the guys watching out the rusty window yells out "I see them, they're coming." Half the class peeks out the glass to catch a glimpse of our new classmates. Like shy kids, everyone scrambles to their seats before they can get caught looking.

It felt kind of funny sitting in a college class. My earliest memories of school were scars. I had seen these institutions as oppressive environments that had stripped me of my sense of self-worth. I had hated school. I hated the way it made me feel. I knew I wasn't alone in feeling this. There were a lot of other guys who had been wounded in similar ways. Despite that we sat in a circle of chairs in a musty classroom. Each one of us had a reason for what had brought us to the facility. Each one of us had a reason of what had brought us to this classroom on this day.

I had grown to see education as a way out. Not so much school, but education. My curiosity was a ravenous dog hungry for anything and everything. When I heard about this class I rushed to get my name on the list. Everyone wanted to be a part of it, but the seating was limited. I was in need of credits for the completion of my degree. In our facility online education was available for high school graduates who qualified for financial aid, or who had families who could pay for it. Having a family who was able to pay for college was a rarity.

I cannot speak for everyone else, but I knew why my two close friends and I were in this class. We had learned how to transcend the confines of oppressive environments through dissecting the structures that had been put in place. Learning was the most potent form of resistance we had access to. We quickly came to find that what we had signed up for was much more than a few credits towards our degrees.

The name of this class was "Metamorphosis," which is defined as an abrupt change or transformation. Our professor, Deb Arthur, came armed with readings that challenged modern methodologies surrounding school systems, the ways in which we interact with our environment, and the corruption that leaches from the faulty structures built to further the marginalization of people who had little to say in the decision-making processes. The goal of this class was to encourage us to become active change agents in our community.

Each week we delved deeper into the material. It was the common cause that united a group of students from all different walks of life. As different as we may have been, we connected on many of the same things, from worldviews to favorite sports teams. Many of us guys on the

inside have been separated from our communities for years. We had entered the system as teenagers and now sat as young adults. I was always curious as to how we measured up against the students on the outside. I wondered about the ways in which we were different as well as similar. I craved outside influence. I wanted so badly to feel connected to my peer group outside of the fences and walls that surrounded me.

As the weeks went on the title of “inside” and “outside” student began to blur. It didn’t matter that we were incarcerated, what mattered was what we brought to class each week: a smile, a positive attitude, and a willingness to grind through the assignments and readings together. Up to this point my classes had been taken solely online. The element of human connection was absent. Never had I been in a class that pulsed with synergy.

Towards the end of our class we were given the task of coming up with a community project. We decided to plant fruit trees within the facility—a way to restore life to our environment and give back to our landscape. Planting these trees was symbolic. It was a symbol of the growth we all had experienced together, but most importantly it was a symbol of the healing many of us received in a community of acceptance and compassion.

“Company”: Vicki Reitenauer, instructor, “Writing as Activism: An Inside-Out Course”

The bedside clock reads 2:42. I am wide-awake, eyelids like cartoon blinds rolling up, revealing the numbers on the digital display. Before this moment I had been in what felt like a deep sleep, though my dreams were filled with prison: With the sounds of the double gate clanging open, clanging shut, clanging open, clanging shut. With the sinking feeling of being contained inside ironclad doors. With the anxiety of trying to understand what the officer in the control room is asking of me and to respond in the correct way. With the pressure of the gaze of my students from the university as I lead our way through these halls. With the pressure of the gaze of my students from inside this facility on those of us who have infiltrated their world. With the pressure of the gaze of the other incarcerated men who watch us stroll to the classroom, who look through the windows at us as they slowly pass by on their way to wherever they’re going, who watch us stroll back out and away.

Here in my bed, my brain jabbbers. My heart breaks.

It is somehow true that it has been all surprise and no surprise for me in entering and exiting this prison over the weeks of this course. I suspected I’d connect with the guys who are incarcerated here, believed I’d have no trouble seeing them as multi-dimensional, fully human, funny, brilliant, pregnant with possibility, profoundly and fundamentally more than whatever offenses they may have committed. That I might appreciate the fact that, had the circumstances of my life been different, I could easily be the one behind the bars. That perhaps I still could be. That, like so many of us on the outside, I have offended and, through the combination of privilege and luck, escaped being caught—and that escape means I sleep, or not, in my own bed every night.

In the future, a inside student will write me a thank-you letter in which he will wonder whether, as a teacher, I had it all under control or whether I had no idea what I was doing and just somehow brought everybody along with me on that wave. Next to his handwriting I will

handwrite *yes*. What else is there to do but hold a space for the possibility of encountering each other tenderly, respectfully, and gratefully? What else is there to do but imagine that we might understand something about caring for each other and ourselves through our encounter, something about compassion, something about power and its right uses? About the ways we are different, and also about the ways we see ourselves in each other, the ways we know ourselves *through* each other, despite and because of these differences?

Because we choose to, we create together a circle in which we all can be contained and to which we all might belong. Because we choose to, we find a way to put our words to paper and then a way to speak those words out into the collective air.

When the outside students and I exit the circle every Monday and Wednesday night, the prison is brightly, eerily lit. I imagine it to be always so, day and night, to never quite approach the darkness that settles around me in the middle of my own night. Lying here, I imagine I have carried some of that electricity home with me, and that's why I'm so entirely awake, so caught up in feeling myself back in Classroom Four. In the circle inside the classroom.

I wonder who from the class might be up right now too, inside the prison and outside it. Their brains jabbering, their hearts breaking. I imagine us in our en-widened circle, keeping each other company.

Conclusion

The authors have sought to share the transformative power of encounter across multiple manifestations of difference and the larger institutional contexts in which these encounters occurred. They hope to have conveyed a sense of how PSU and University Studies has invested in curricular innovation and community partnership that results in change for individuals, for groups, and for the communities in which we are all situated. The work at PSU continues, both to sustainably fund Inside-Out courses (as they are perceived to involve some funding loss for the University, given the reduced tuition charged to those inside students seeking course credit and the absence of tuition dollars entirely in the cases of those inside students not earning credit) and to institutionalize mechanisms to increase access to a college degree for formerly incarcerated persons. We the students and faculty at PSU, who are moved and changed by transformative educational experiences such as these, are indebted to those visionary administrators at all levels of the University, whose efforts operationalize the processes by which these experiences may continue, grow, and flourish, in the interest of transforming ourselves and our world.

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Author Information

Vicki L. Reitenauer serves on the faculty of the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department and the University Studies program at Portland State University, specializing in developing and teaching both discipline-specific and general-education courses, including community-based learning experiences; building and sustaining community partnerships; facilitating relational faculty support processes; and co-creating faculty-led assessment practices. She has co-authored numerous works on these topics, including *Learning through Serving: A Student Guidebook for Service-Learning and Civic Engagement across Academic Disciplines and Cultural Communities* (Stylus, second edition, 2013).

*Vicki L. Reitenauer
Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies
Portland State University
PO Box 751
Portland, OR 97207-0751
Email: vicr@pdx.edu
Telephone: 503-725-5847
Fax: 503-725-5805

Katherine Elaine Draper-Beard is an undergraduate student at Portland State University majoring in Liberal Studies. She is a fervent reader, a novice gardener, and an overprotective pet owner. She has participated in the Inside-Out program with Portland State both as a student and a teaching assistant at Columbia River Correctional Institution in northeast Portland. She spends her free time indulging in CandyCrush, assisting documentary film production, and being of maximum service to adolescents in her community who struggle with addiction.

Noah Schultz is a social innovator, public speaker, and poet/author who is passionate about bringing services to underprivileged youth. In 2009 he was sentenced to serve 7.5 years under Oregon's Measure 11. He dedicated this time to personal transformation and education. While incarcerated, he attended his first Inside-Out class through Portland State University and went on to graduate as a double major from Oregon State University. He now works in Portland, Oregon, following his passion to implement change within the juvenile justice system.

* Corresponding author