The late Maxine Greene once said, “in many respects, teaching and learning are matters of breaking through barriers.” These barriers come in myriad forms for those who were born into poverty and dysfunctional families. Consequently, many of these individuals lose their compass and end up in prison. By offering the incarcerated a post-secondary education many of these pre-existing barriers are removed upon re-entry to society. A significant amount of empirical evidence documents that inmates who pursue associate and bachelor’s degrees while incarcerated tend to become law-abiding citizens significantly more after their release from prison than inmates who did not advance their education while incarcerated. Furthermore, cost-effective analyses have shown that it is less expensive to educate inmates than to reincarcerate them. It is therefore important that the college education of inmates be central to the topic of lowering recidivism.

The Prison to College Pipeline Program, which is a collaboration between John Jay College of Criminal Justice, the NYS Department of Corrections and Community Supervision and Hostos Community College, is an initiative that is proving to be transformative in the lives of the participants (student-inmates and educators). Student-inmates are given an opportunity to rehabilitate themselves by receiving post-secondary education while incarcerated and upon release from prison. Educators are given the opportunity to make a positive impact in the lives of individuals that have been cast off as undesirable by society. Many people assume that inmates make the best students because they are a captive audience and have all the time in the world to do schoolwork. This, however, is a misconception. Inmates in a postsecondary-education program must still fulfill their daily work requirements and must complete their coursework with less technology for research and learning. For most, a pen or a typewriter is the tool for writing papers. Proper referencing citations must be recalled from memory and not the Internet. Despite these challenges, the Otisville inmates in the Prison to College Pipeline Program have proven that education can break barriers, especially for those who come from impoverished backgrounds and have been marginalized. Most of the student-inmates were disengaged from the educational system at an early age and yet are managing to excel academically. Their mastery over grammar, in-text citation, and critical thinking only affirms that the education-attainment gap that is pervasive in the United States is a result of the “war on drugs” and the disinvestment of communities of color, and poor young Black and Brown individuals growing under these circumstances are casualties of these biased policies.

PEDAGOGICAL POINTS

FACULTY TEACHING IN CORRECTIONAL ENVIRONMENTS

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Teaching at the Otisville New York State Correctional Facility has been both rewarding and challenging. The reward was teaching a highly engaged and academically prepared group of students. Had it not been for the yellow cinderblock walls and the green uniforms worn by the students, I would have thought I was teaching a gifted class of college students on any college campus. The constraints were considerable and quite different from those encountered in other teaching environments. Technology was not at our disposal; therefore, teaching and learning had to be adjusted to the bare bones of hard documents and engaging classroom discussions. By drawing on past practice of critical pedagogy, I built on learners’ experiences to make the course content more accessible. I carefully monitored the students’ attitudes toward the course content and was able to work with them to create viable teaching and learning strategies. Critical to this process was the acknowledgement that many of the techniques I used in previous teaching settings would not be suitable in a correctional environment. The icebreakers or small group work that I usually use early in the course of my regular classes would have alienated a number of students, precipitated inter-group conflict, and possibly discredited me in front of the class. One of the tenets of critical pedagogy is drawing on the learners’ experiences and awareness of the context of their learning. In addition, critical pedagogy is analogous to the empowerment of learners and arises from Freirian education. Education that leads to liberation is the slogan associated with Freirian education. Freirian education asserts that power should be given to the masses. In contrast, prison disempowers the incarcerated learner. Teaching in a correctional environment provides no avenues for learners or educators to effectively participate in decisions about education programs. The main focus of the correctional system is to be punitive and controlling. Therefore, discussing social injustices through an activist lens that calls on learners to become agents of social change is not only radical in a correctional environment, but could also be perceived as subversive. In my efforts to not swim against the tide of prison authority, I decided to encourage students to utilize their own personal plights as a source of knowledge and to critically analyze the issue of health and social inequity through a socio-ecological perspective that accounts for the proximal and distal factors that influence health and social outcomes. This process was iterative and proved to be beneficial in the students’ learning of the multiple factors that contribute to poor health outcomes in certain populations. As an educator, I tend to see the best in everyone, and I see knowledge as a tool for the improvement of humanity. As such, teaching in the Prison to College Pipeline Program has warranted me the opportunity to move from rhetoric to praxis by directly impacting individuals that have been cast off by society yet have precious gifts to offer--if only given a chance.

Attend her next workshop “The Role of Faculty in the Prison College Pipeline” on November 21, 2016 from 11:00 am -12:30 pm in Room A-130!