Development of New Courses to be Taught at the Penitentiary

Pedagogical Inquiry Grant, Summer 2024

Participants: Mitch Clearfield, Philosophy (Coordinator)

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Background and Overview

Whitman's relationship with the Washington State Penitentiary (WSP) goes back at least to the 1970s, with a lot of variation over the years. Classes that bring together "outside" students (from Whitman's campus) and "inside students" (incarcerated at WSP) were started by Heather Hayes in Spring 2016, and after her sudden departure they were picked up by Mitch Clearfield in Spring 2019. After a pause due to the pandemic, they resumed in fall 2022. In summer 2023, Mitch began an informal reading group that also brought together inside and outside students, and that continued through the 2023-24 academic year. In Fall 2023, Mitch offered the first Whitman class in a different part of the prison with a separate population.

In both of those parts of the prison, there is great interest among the incarcerated populations for a greater number and variety of classes. There is also more than enough interest among students on campus to support a greater number and variety of combined classes.

Such courses have proven to be high-impact, transformative experiences for students from both institutions. But to be successful, such courses require an understanding of that unique environment and of the specific opportunities that a combined course affords.

The ultimate goal of this project was to provide a structure and process to assist faculty in developing new courses to be taught at WSP. First, the Coordinator had to design that process, drawing on his own experiences teaching at WSP as well as his prior participation in an intensive instructor training by the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program and his connections with others involved in higher education in prison. The process that he designed in May and June was then carried out in July. It included a tour of the prison; a variety of readings and other materials related to higher education in prisons throughout the country; and a series of workshops both on campus and inside the Penitentiary, with former students from both institutions.

What was the outcome of your project and how did it align with your original goals as stated in your application?

We believe that the project was very successful in achieving its stated goals. All of the participants (including the Coordinator) came away feeling much better prepared to develop and to teach their new classes at WSP, and with a broader understanding of the national and institutional contexts, as well as greater preparedness for potential issues that might arise. All of us were also greatly benefited by the former students' feedback on texts, topics, and pedagogical approaches that we were considering. Gaining greater familiarity with the physical space was also a vital element, to increase the comfort of new instructors, who will then have to lead students into this space and make them feel comfortable with it. Throughout the process, the multiplicity of voices (former outside students, former / future inside students, WSP staff, and one experienced instructor) helped the group recognize and engage with the complexity of the issues. Finally, we believe that the process developed could productively be repeated for other new instructors in the future.

In addition to achieving its stated goals, we believe that the project achieved some further goals that were not initially intended. In a way, this project expanded as it was being run, with some important implications for the future of the program. First, while much of the focus was on helping instructors with their individual future classes, we also came away with some programmatic lessons for all and had a lot of deep conversation about the direction, mission, vision, and work to do for the health of the program as a whole.

Second, it became evident that the workshops inside the Penitentiary served as a message to inside students that we are committed to hearing their voices and working with them. That kind of collaborative co-ownership of the program is morally appropriate within its context, and also practically beneficial for its vitality. At their request, we plan a follow-up meeting shortly after New Years to update them about the impacts of the summer work and how our plans have developed.

And third, we'll note that many of the considerations brought up in the articles we read or in discussions with students are issues in *all* classrooms, but just seem more salient or more visible in this unique teaching environment. Those include: trauma-responsive practices, addressing race and gender dynamics, fostering community amongst students, adapting to unexpected situations, and designing course materials that take into account a wide range of student preparation or access to varying resources. Having the gift of time to reflect on those issues with other faculty *and* students will not only affect our capacities to design good courses for this program, but also to improve our regular on-campus courses as well.

Finally, we'll mention that the experience as a whole was very inspiring and energizing. The students (both inside and outside) powerfully articulated the value of their education, the importance of their interactions with others, and both big-picture and small-practical ideas, so well. It is a nice reminder of some really meaningful outcomes in learning that are easy to lose track of when getting bogged down in paperwork, grading, etc.

What sense do you have at this point that your project has enhanced student learning and what will you be looking at in the future to know whether the project was successful?

The project's impacts on student learning aren't apparent yet: as of this writing, Sharon's class has only had its (separate) orientations for inside and outside students, while Mitch's, Maria's, and Chris's classes will all be offered in future semesters.

In the future, the primary sign of the project's success will be the positive experiences of the students in our new classes at WSP. Those experiences will be conveyed through comments both during and outside of class, and also (for the outside students) in their course evaluations. It will also be important to see how well-prepared Chris and Maria feel in completing the design of their courses, and how comfortable and confident the two of them and Sharon are in actually teaching their classes. While we believe that the process developed this summer will be replicable for other faculty rotating into the program, it will be important to see if that proves to be correct in practice.

Over the longer term and beyond individual classes, we will also look for indications that the program as a whole is healthy: robust offerings from a variety of departments, enthusiastic instructors, support from departmental colleagues, high levels of interest from both students on campus and WSP residents, continued support from WSP staff and administration, and continued support from the Whitman administration.

What were the limitations or failings of this project, and how, in retrospect, might they have been better addressed or remedied?

While surely there are ways that the details of the project could have been fine-tuned, overall the only significant limitations that we experienced were because of the nature of operations at the Penitentiary: meetings with the inside students were limited, and communication with them outside of the meetings wasn't possible. Those factors cannot be changed (by us).