

SOMETHING BETTER: AN EXPERIENCE OF INTERPERSONAL EXCHANGE

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Abstract

How do words, movements, signs, and artistic expressions transform people, places, and events in ways that bring about social change? What are the motivational methods, politics, and implications of "doing good work?" In what ways does an understanding of such engagement depend on one's position as an artist, community activist, social justice advocate, and community member? My participation as an outsider to the Sullivan County House of Corrections has given me the opportunity to participate in a performance arts program focusing on incarceration and addiction: witnessing, collaborating, and working with prisoners and putting words into action and actions into words through a theatrical performance. In this paper, I will combine research on themes related to incarceration, rehabilitation, transition, and facilitation with critical analysis and self-reflection on the effectiveness of community-based learning and performance in rehabilitation.

Introduction

Community-based art performance is any art created with the purpose of engaging a particular community in a larger dialogue with the purpose of generating positive change. It is art created by people whose lives directly inform the subject matter. The research field of performance addresses questions such as:

- What do we mean by "community?"
- What is "performing art?"
- What is the role of the arts in community and community based art education?
- What impact do performing artists have on their community (ies)?

Historically, community-based art has theatrical underpinnings and examines the kinds of work engaged in by arts-oriented organizations. In this work, I also intend to test and verify theories and purposes which will pertain specifically to research of *Telling My Story* (TMS), which is a community-based organization. This program can improve people skills, or alternatively, empower specific groups of people in working closely together in a positive direction.

My personal involvement in the theatrical performance in Sullivan County Department of Corrections offered me the unique opportunity to study our increasingly elusive, ever-growing incarceration system from two distinct perspectives, theoretical and practical. I have focused on the issues prisoners face both inside and outside prison such as incarceration, rehabilitation, and transition, while simultaneously exploring facilitation with critical analysis and self-reflection on the effectiveness of community-based learning and performance in rehabilitation. My objective then is to inform people about the root causes of social isolation and invisibility mainly pertaining to incarceration and addiction, and the issues this population faces as prisoners, and parolees/ex-offenders. A related goal is learning how to facilitate and improvise, in the broad sense of that term.

What the program is about?

Pati Hernandez is an adjunct Professor of Women's and Gender Studies at Dartmouth College, and a long-time collaborator and performer with Bread and Puppet Theater. Professor Hernandez brings more than a decade of experience working in theater and correctional facilities to the project. Her professional focus is the exploration of political and social problems through the arts. She is the creator and facilitator of *Telling My Story*, a program she developed in correctional facilities and rehab centers in Vermont since 1999. Hernandez recalls the essence of her activism: "The goal is to develop self-awareness and communication skills through art" (Hernandez, personal communication, 2015). In the TMS mission statement, "*Telling My Story* is a theater workshop and program that works on the development of self-awareness and communication skills through theater. Through group work, theater exercises, writing and telling of personal stories, participants explore their own personal histories. Working together with a facilitator, the participants create, from scratch, a theater production that uses the voices and personal narratives of the participants to explore various social issues" (Telling My Story, 2015).

The *Telling My Story* program is run over a period of 10 weeks for the lead facilitator, and 8 weeks long for the rest of the participants. The program is offered to a group of 12-14 participants behind visible or invisible social walls (the program may also reach out to homeless people, welfare recipients, drug addicts, inmates, ex-inmates, domestic violence victims, teenage mothers, and families of inmates), working together with 12-14 inmate members and 12 students. It was the intention of this specific program to bring these two groups to a common ground of sharing and understanding that will provide a platform for specific action taking in social reflections. The focus of the population behind walls is to find their individual and group voice, while the focus of the outside community was to facilitate those voices. That was how and why our whole group came together.

The group met weekly, with parallel one on one sessions throughout the process. Each session in a week is divided into three hours of group work, plus, one hour of individual meeting with the participants. The culmination of the program is two days of performances to an audience that includes administrators and other members of the inside community, general community from the outside, and family members. A final session held after the performance gives the facilitator and participants the opportunity to evaluate the project.

People behind social walls can suffer from poor communication skills and low self-esteem. Many are living out the harsh consequences of their actions without the ability to gain a useful perspective on their situation. They lack tools to begin substantive change in outlook and attitude. The goal of this program is to empower participants to make their own positive choices in daily life. By developing greater clarity about themselves and learning new ways of expressing themselves, participants can find courage and willingness to begin changing for the better. The ensemble work challenges participants to express themselves individually and as a group, through the writing of the scripts, poems/flows/raps, individual testimonials, and any other possible excuse that can provide voice to them. The group needs to listen to one another, and organize themselves as a group in order to effectively respond to the needs of the production, from character development, to organizing the back stage actively participating in the scene changes, making props, and working on the "Talking Wall Backdrop," which was a stand up "storybook" wall that contained words and ideas for the skit.

Setting the Stage

Our social structure is full of unseen, unspoken, and unheard dynamics. These hidden and irresponsible social behaviors, such as selling drugs or breaking and entering a home, have always contributed to the building of invisible and visible social walls. Behind these walls, a growing invisible population has found a way to visibility into society through addiction, violence, and crime. As we move forward with our lives, we become more accustomed and feel safer when experiencing some kind of comfortable knowledge. We know what we like and dislike, what we want to do and not do, what we want to see and not see, what we want to talk and not talk about, and how and when we want to act and not act. We control our lives. Contrary to that, it can seem that we have lost the ability to embrace life as it is, and we have lost the ability to deal with all the components of any social experience, and many individuals have isolated themselves from life's full social responsibility by being exposed and in many cases addicted to drugs and alcohol. These isolated worlds have fostered ignorance, lack of communication and tolerance, while diversity has become an uncomfortable cultural experience. So while we experience globalization as the way the future, we embrace isolation and exclusiveness more and more as a way to feel safe.

We like to believe that every person in America should have an equal opportunity for success, however, institutionalized racism and classism pervade in our society, increasing the risk that people from certain socio-economic or racial groups will end up in prison rather than in careers or higher education. This racism and classism can be perpetuated through policies and laws, such as the differential sentences for heroine, crack, and cocaine. Racism and classism are reinforced in society through policies that impose different sentences for similar crimes. Until 2010 when the Fair Sentencing Act passed reducing the sentencing disparity between offenses for crack and powder cocaine from 100:1 to 18:1 offenders would be assigned the same sentence for 5 grams of crack, typically a blue collar drug, as 500 grams of cocaine, a white collar drug, even though both drugs had very similar health effects. This law clearly targeted certain racial groups, as 79 percent of crack users were black in 2009, while only 28 percent of cocaine users were black (US News, 2010). Racism and classism are also reinforced through conscious or subconscious stereotypes, which are perpetuated by news and television shows. In, "Teaching You to Love Fear," Travis Dixon (2011) discusses his personal experience and research looking at exaggeration and stereotyping of black men as criminals in television shows. He writes that while "crime reports indicate that only 10 percent of white victims are murdered by black offenders, the Philadelphia television news shows depicted a world in which 42 percent of white victims were murdered by black thugs" (109). This stereotyping can cause people who would not typically be racist watching news shows to form incorrect assumptions about certain groups, which can result in racist or classist profiling. In my personal circle of social life, I have often heard people explain how they do not consider themselves to be racist, but admitted that they unknowingly made racist or classist assumptions based on the inherent views and misrepresentations of society.

From Separate Worlds to a Shared Community

The foundation of this article began with 12 Dartmouth students and Pati Hernandez as our lead facilitator, and about 12 male residents of the Sullivan County House of Corrections walking to the front of a room and introducing themselves to each other by saying their names and where they were from. We then began to talk about our likes and dislikes. Initially, we came together as two apparently different groups: students from a fancy, name brand Ivy League institution and men from a hidden, stigmatized population in a substance abuse rehabilitation center.

Once we introduced ourselves, we noticed links across the gap that divided us. Some people said they didn't like authority, and some people defiantly stated that they didn't like onions. We shared the human experience of liking and disliking, and we even shared some of the same objects of affection and disgust. The exercise became about a shared relationship instead of solely a shared object. A bridge began to form between groups whose material conditions could be immediately recognized by who had to ask to use the bathroom and who could just go. Over eight weeks we turned these shared relationships back into a shared object, a shared moment in which we put on the performance on which we collaborated. At the final theatrical performance, participants' voices, including those who were not even at the performance, spoke as one voice, not of a homogeneous life experience but of a heterogeneous community.

The group was composed of individuals from mainly two different social backgrounds, where social walls played a strong role on an initial division. The final goal of the group was to become one, by bringing into the group dynamics that participants experienced. The goal of the activities was to take those walls down to enable building paths for communication. A flexible approach to the work was required at all times. Participants were encouraged to try different roles, and learn them all in case there is a need to replace someone at any given time. Confidentiality was of great importance throughout the process; what was shared in the group stayed in the group. This policy would build trust, and trust is a precious tool for the program.

Many factors contributed to the hesitancy of participants in such a participatory project that was initially exhibited in the correction facility. The guarded incarcerated can show a constrained way of expressing themselves. Length of incarceration can contribute a difficult and complicated period of adjustment. At this point in dealing with their confined lives, persons are struggling to find their place in society. They are highly self-conscious and wary of being criticized. However, a community-based theatrical performance is a collaborative platform and public art form that requires the full presence of the self physically, mentally, and emotionally.

A Humanizing Education

Through my work and through my reading, listening and conversation with colleagues and professionals during the past several months and while working and writing this paper, I have thought a great deal about humanizing education. By looking at the relationship between a theatrical performance and community-based learning, our lead facilitator, Pati, said the overall goal of the *Telling My Story* workshop is to develop a more personal understanding of each other and dissolve stereotypes: "There are visible and invisible walls and social walls that divide us" (Hernandez, personal communication, 2013). By creating a theatrical performance together we learned that we had more in common with each other than originally thought, and our final skit exemplified perfectly this notion. What was needed was to see from the participants from behind the walls was to take active participation in the general process, from volunteering to be a secretary during group work, to making props, organize the back stage, improvise, write and/or develop a skit. In this way participants will develop initiative throughout the process. The process offers a variety of ways to being involved; participants need to choose according to their needs and interests. They need to really take care of themselves; if they don't take the responsibility of voicing out their opinions and concerns, they will not be fully be represented.

I am encouraged by Freire's (1993) dialogical theory that can be used as a roadmap toward a more humanized existence, in which barriers of class and culture are torn down and all participants, whether myself or inmates, are given a means of expressing their ideas and realities. I believe that a theory that emphasizes equality and dialogue rather than divisions of power can help us achieve greater solidarity

with oppressed populations and that humanity is more closely related than we think. Thus, I will further explain and discuss how every participant, including inmates and the "out mates" of the group, participates in the *Telling My Story* program. All reflections and motivations will be based by my appreciation of Paolo Freire's theory presented in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Because Freire (1993) has placed tremendous emphasis on the value of human experience and meaning in his philosophy of education, I have been led to appreciate the critical role of pedagogy of the oppressed by which he means one of the major symptoms of oppression is the identification of people as "objects" to be used by the oppressors for their own purposes, rather than "subjects" who freely exercise their right to be active citizens. Thus, a quest for true justice necessitates an effort to increase the extent to which people are treated as subjects rather than objects. One way to accomplish this is to invite oppressed, voiceless people into the praxis cycle of action and reflection, by means of education. I greatly enjoyed delving into Freire's analysis of banking education versus problem-based education and his explanation of how humanist liberators can apply problem-based education theory to create a dialogue with the oppressed.

Freire describes two distinct approaches to education: the "banking" approach, in which students are seen as "empty vessels" to be filled with knowledge by the intellectually superior instructor, and the "problem-based" approach, in which teachers and students are seen as equal participants in an active dialogue about a particular problem. Freire believes the "banking" approach to education could lead to dehumanization, the act of making a person feel less human by taking away their identity. Freire expounds that if students are seen as mere empty banks to be filled by the teacher, then it follows that ultimately the student's highest achievement becomes the ability to regurgitate concepts given to them by the teacher. Since the student cannot contribute any of his or her own ideas, there is no possibility of equality, dialogue, or mutual growth. The students will always be like colonized people trying to appease the colonizer. I feel that, in describing such a concept of education, Freire has given words to ideas that I have felt for years. I believe that this "banking" process is unfortunately exemplified in our educational system, in which the teacher pontificates what they view as their ultimate mastery of knowledge upon the students with little room for genuine dialogue. If my work at the Sullivan County Correctional Facility were done from a "banking" perspective, I would simply be using my time to teach the inmates skills and ideas I feel are important for them to learn without taking the time to understand their own perceptions of their situation or allowing their voices to be heard.

Freire's alternative is a problem-based approach, in which students and teachers engage in dialogue about a particular problem. In contrast to a "banking" system, this way of educating allows students (and in this case inmates) to actively contribute to the conversation by giving voice to their own perceptions, knowledge, and ideas. Rather than being seen as empty vessels to be filled, students in the problem-based approach are seen as human beings with valid ways of understanding the world around them. Thus, I believe that, in contrast to the banking system that sees students as objects, the problem-based approach sees students as human beings with valid knowledge and a rightful voice, thereby combating a major symptom of oppression. Freire goes on to describe how the problem-based approach can be implemented through the art of praxis, a combination of dialogical reflection on reality with tangible action to change that reality. He uses the example of his own work with oppressed laborers, describing how, rather than immediately begin teaching them his own ideas of liberation, he first spent a long time attempting to understand their culture, language use, ways of thinking, and stories so that he could engage them in dialogical reflection and action in ways that allowed their voices to be heard.

The process of collaboration ensures that phenomenological issues are being approached from a variety of perspectives rather than through a solution imposed by the researcher. I have the experience of

being published through several articles, some in bilingual newspaper media, based on my past working experience. I feel this form of storytelling works by giving the listener a window into a stranger's life, similar to the relationship between a journalist and their subject. Such a relationship inherently involves a separation between the storyteller and the listener, a power dynamic in which the journalist is considered by her or himself superior to his or her subject, and a tendency of such journalist approaches to analyze and make assumptions based on what they hear rather than engage in critical dialogue with the subject. Ideally, in collaborative dialogue the "stories" told are not the stories of individuals, but stories produced from a combination of the experiences, knowledge, and imaginations of all members of a dialogue or given group.

The Challenges of Raising Consciousness

Each and every one of us sees the world through one pair of eyes, grasps it with one set of hands and hears it through one pair of ears. This inevitably leads to difficulty in any group's creative process. If each and every person perceives the world uniquely, and brings their own story into their conceptualization of the world we live in, how then do groups effectively create social change? In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Freire (1993) explores this concept in detail through his exploration of revolutionary leadership, asking that leaders not prescribe their ideals upon anyone, no matter how well intentioned. I lived this concept during the whole process of *Telling My Story* workshop at the facility, working my way through the piles of words that can have very different meanings depending on who is listening.

Freire (1993) writes that "the conviction of the oppressed that they must fight for their liberation is not a gift bestowed by the revolutionary leadership, but the result of their own conscientização" (67). This word, Freire's own, refers to consciousness-raising, a process by which the oppressed come to recognize and take action against the oppressive forces in their lives. Yet this concept, while harking to a world with liberation for many, is reductionist in its approach to the voices of the oppressed. To suggest that "the oppressed," as a singular entity, must awake to some new consciousness, simply forms another world consciousness shaped by one set of eyes. Freire also writes that "The correct method for a revolutionary leadership to employ in the task of liberation is *not* 'libertarian propaganda.' Nor can the leadership merely 'implant' in the oppressed a belief in freedom, thus thinking to win their trust. The correct method lies in dialogue" (67). This loss of individual voice in collective consciousness-raising is particularly critical to consider when any one member of a group imposes a perspective of what they think the other members need.

However, engaging in dialogue that allows all individuals involved to find their voice can actually make consciousness raising for social change more difficult to achieve. It highlights the complexity of a problem, making the reality and goals of the group as a whole less clear. In her book *Skin: Talking about Sex, Class and Literature: A Question of Class*, Dorothy Allison (1994) said, "If I had not been raised to give my life away, would I have made such an effective, self-sacrificing revolutionary"? Allison was used to giving in to stereotypes and assumptions of her life and of what being poor and lesbian should be like. Therefore, she was easily able to agree and stand behind everything that a group dedicated to social change was trying to accomplish a goal at first, without examining and sharing her own complex values that were shaped by her own unique background. If she had indeed taken the time to explore her values separate from the group's goals and found that some of her values were not being addressed (as she later did), then she may not have wholeheartedly supported the movement for social change.

Looking back at the facility, I had experienced similar problems in trying to make decisions regarding the final theatrical performance. The day we chose the words for the skit/play, our lead

facilitator told the inmates that this was their chance to speak up, and if they remained silent their voice may not be heard. Most of the inmates did engage and express themselves, but because many of them engaged, there was disagreement about which words were important for the play and the process of choosing took the entire workshop period. This highlighted the difficulty of incorporating individuals' voices while still trying to accomplish a specific goal.

When trying to raise consciousness for social change through working with the inmates, I have found that my role is not to take away freedom of the individual voice but just the opposite: I was trying to get the individual to speak freely through dialogue. Thus, allowing the individual to express their feelings, thoughts, and beliefs necessary for social change to ensure that we are not imposing our beliefs on others, even though it makes the process of achieving a specific goal more difficult. I have found that it is a difficult balance to facilitate dialogue that allows each individual to express his/her own unique values while still moving forward towards a specific goal of raising consciousness. However, learning how to maintain and navigate this balance is vital to work towards genuine consciousness raising and social change.

In my participation at the Sullivan County Correctional Facility, I have observed that our lead facilitator followed a problem-based approach to our work by focusing on team building activities in which Dartmouth students and inmates contribute as equal participants. We participated in activities where we had to work together in groups to come up with skits, images, and artistic performances involving music and words; each of these activities required us to shed our assumptions about one another and work together as equals toward a common goal. Following Freire's idea of praxis, this format also allows us to get to know one another's ideas, perceptions, and realities before forcing any solutions of our own.

The Power of the Arts in Correctional Facilities

Performing arts and its preparation gives inmates a sense of liberation, a venue for self-expression, a platform to foster identity. Part of the process of programs like *Telling My Story* includes increased confidence, social skills, and self-reflection. Giving our theatrical performance in front of an audience highlighted the heightened awareness of the collective group. The *Telling My Story* enables participants to cross the barriers of class and race and initiates new bonds of solidarity. The collective task of creating a public performance draws all those participating together across both superficial and real obstructions serving as a platform upon which to make connections. However, it is important to recognize that each member in the program experiences different moments of continuity and connectivity; some of us felt connection and disconnect in the very same moments. This embodies the fact that the feeling of having crossed barriers does not come from any one simple action. Rather it took dedication to a lengthy collaboration for us each to find the certain element that resonated for us.

Research suggests that arts participation is not only popular but also a highly effective tool in building and sustaining healthy, livable communities. Tina Mashi, assistant professor at Fordham University's Graduate School of Social Services, has been documenting the outcomes of programs such as *Rehabilitation Through the Arts* (RTA, 2015), which was established in Sing Sing correctional facility in New York. The program promotes theatre, dance, voice, music, visual arts, and creative writing in men and women's state prisons including New York City. As Mashi notes (2013), the program uses the arts as prevention for people with mental health trauma or criminal offenses (Klimaski, 2013). Mashi explains that the program "increased confidence and social skills...and self-reflection" which counteracts the often impulsive actions of incarcerated individuals. "Other benefits," she said,

"included better anger management, improved academic achievement, and reduced recidivism or relapsing into crime" (RTA, 2015).

The arts included in Mashi's program are similar to some of the exercises that were an integral part of our course, including skits, plays, music, and drumming. They were designed to unite the collective group, but received mixed reactions from students and inmates alike. Some members of the class felt an intimate sense of connection during the drumming exercise, while others emphasized the inability of some members of the group to keep a rhythm. The theatrical performance which inmates and students created in the facility in Unity, NH, contained skits about privilege and anger; about bad choices, demons and false assumptions of freedom, about family and hope. The audiences can view the aspects of supporting, challenging, or contradicting. The audience is made up of limitless personal convictions. For example, the skit in which I performed was about a party with drugs that was interrupted by the police and then followed by a court scene in which the offenders went to jail. I played the Judge explaining how a crime is a crime and supporting freedom does not entitle one to commit a crime. Another skit involved a burglary that was being planned but was never carried out after the ringleader had a "visit" from a ghost (played by a Dartmouth student) of his future the night before and he sees himself alone and in jail. As a result he decides not to go forward with the burglary. The inmate involved in this skit did not heed his "ghost's" advice and found himself playing the individual who had. A good warning sign or premonition, especially for the individual who "played" the incarcerated. This inmate expressed during the planning stages of the skit that when he leaves the facility he hopes to meet with young offenders, to instill in them the messages he has learned in jail, and throughout this workshop. Obviously, no one can please everyone, yet in collective community-based projects, such as the one we created at the jail, yet the audience and the participants can be pleased on multiple levels.

Despite these differences, however, there were some inherent benefits that the facility provided. As Buzz Alexander (2011) states, "Perhaps the best service anyone could give a man in prison is to make him think...it seems the best service anyone could give a man in prison is to let him know it is okay to think. They are not encouraged to think. It is discouraged more than anyone out there can ever understand" (p. 173, S. J. Hartnett, 2011). As the quote suggests, it is more than likely that most people in prison will never get the chance to show anyone who they are or what they can do. This workshop encouraged us all to think, and consequently offers an opportunity to begin constructing new images of people, new possibilities and responsibilities. One of the common approaches to doing time in a prison is to shut the world out. This program brings together people who would rarely cross paths, much less engage in intellectual discussion. In our time together, through dialogue, structured activities, and planning the show, we were all made to think about our collaboration. We were all getting to know a new population and giving the space to reflect on and share our thoughts about our work. There is merit in returning to the facility on a weekly basis and sharing an afternoon together, evidenced when I shared how refreshing it was to also engage with Dartmouth students.

Through the shared experience of the arts some of us have found ourselves surprisingly connected. By engaging in dialogue as a community the possibility of breaking down walls between those on the inside and those on the outside becomes much more likely. This platform created moments that everyone identified as moments of connection. One student expressed that she felt a human connection when one of the inmates asked her how she was, and, similarly, students and inmates both noted how unified they felt when everyone stood together facing the audience. In *Challenging the Prison: Industrial Complex*, Buzz Alexander (2011) expresses a similar sentiment when he states, "Our celebration after the second performance was enhanced by our sense of solidarity in refusing to yield in the face of so much opposition, for we were making art, building community, and practicing resistance"

(157). The practice of making scenery (art), music (drumming), performing arts (speaking in public about attitudes), despite the admittedly artificial platform created real and tangible moments of human connection.

Developing trust of self, amongst the college students is integral to engaging the dramatic process

In other instances such as my personal involvement in the theatrical performance in Sullivan County Department of Corrections, I see the arts as a practical tool for communicating between the outside public and prisoners, maintaining parolees/ex-offenders cohesion, promoting social justice issues or making social connections with incarceration and/or addiction problems.

In one of the skits in the theatrical performance in the project, a group of inmates talked among themselves, making stereotypical remarks about college students while the students, on the other side, spoke similarly about inmates. In the testimonials part of the theatrical performance, all the students and the inmates participating are asked to write a testimonial of their experience to present at the end performance. I observed that in these testimonials the inmates spoke of losing a sense of freedom, becoming more self-conscious. Even though most of the college students viewed themselves as comfortable, open and expressive, it was clear to me from my observations that the inmates were somewhat cautious and guarded. That this particular performance combines honest moving personal stories to open a space for public discussion can be a scary and dangerous process because it is a public art and public dialog form. An inmate may feel very self-conscious to say some “weird” things in public, to open themselves emotionally in the presence of other people who may or may not be supportive of them. Add to this natural desire to do it right, to be good, to be original, and to be funny, and consequentially spontaneity, creativity, and imagination can be stifled. However, one inmate reflected in his testimonial that the skit had made him see that he blamed his anger for putting him in a “dark place.” He continued, “I learned to be a lot more positive and see people in new ways. We can all do the same thing. I don’t see myself as someone who always messes up.”

Conversely, as Dartmouth students and incarcerated individuals relaxed and slowly lowered their guard, they began to realize that the work we were doing on one level was simply enjoyable, and on a more serious level it could be an outlet to explore some of the complicated issues we were all facing. In my own experience of observing and working with incarcerated individuals, they let go of their inhibitions and play more freely when, at their own pace and in their own way (based on their own stories), they become more open to new possibilities and experiences and their work becomes more imaginative and emotionally expressive. They become more trustful, worry less about other people, they laugh freely, and allow more of their own nature to be present in their work.

In these ways, our performance aims to break down stereotypes about invisible populations, have the audience of our performance experience the power of listening to and emphasize the importance of critical presence in society.

Conclusion

In establishing positive relationships and working together by sharing knowledge and expertise everyone learned from each other as people as equals during the process of creating the theatrical performance. The importance of developing tasks while incarceration is taking place becomes self-evident. Peer relationships make unique contributions to the growth of social and emotional competence in the acquisition of social skills and values while the development of the capacity to form relationships with others is taking place. In addition, peer groups provide an important source of emotional support. This

was the real experience of college students and inmates alike. Everyone took the time to look at each other as peers and realize similarities and differences thereby creating a unique bond.

The *Telling My Story* program offered me the unique opportunity to collaborate with a group of people from behind those social walls from two distinct perspectives: theoretical and practical. Its final goal is the creation and performance of an original production on the theme of the inmates' voices. Creating a theatrical performance allowed students and inmates alike to work together, share knowledge and expertise, and learn from each other as people and equals.

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