Bringing the Criminal Justice System to Life Inside the Classroom
by Sara Appleby, Ph.D.

In the Summer of 2016, I was fortunate enough to attend one of the Inside Out Prison Exchange’s instructor training institutes. Inside Out brings incarcerated students (Inside students) and campus-based students (Outside students) together to learn for a semester. The main goal of Inside Out is to facilitate dialogue across differences, however, you can imagine that there are many benefits for both groups of students. In Fall of 2017, I taught my General Education Building Community Class as an Inside Out class at our local prison. The class was an incredible success and everyone at both institutions was onboard for a repeat in Fall 2018. Working with prisons, however, has many challenges, one of which is that educational institutions plan far more in advance than prisons. As a result, one week before the Fall 2018 semester started, I received word from the prison’s Deputy Warden of Care and Treatment that there was a new Warden who needed more time to learn about the program before he approved it – time that my students and I did not have. Thus, one week before school started, the Inside Out class was canceled…but my Building Community class was not.

My mind was racing. I had promised the outside students a unique and life changing educational experience and it did not feel right to go back to a traditional classroom. What was I going to do? Over the next few days, I contemplated what some of the most important benefits of Inside Out were for my Building Community class, and more importantly which of those I could attempt to replicate in a traditional classroom setting. The two I decided to focus on were: (1) allowing students a chance to interact with the criminal justice system, rather than simply reading about it; and (2) allowing students a chance to hear the stories and lived experiences of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated men and women in their own voices. Now that I had a vision of what I wanted my class to look like, I could start making a plan. I decided to use a combination of field trips, podcasts, memoirs, guest speakers, and documentaries to bring the Criminal Justice System to life for my students.

Below are some of the resources that I used (or considered using but did not due to time constraints) collected all in one place for fellow APLS members to explore. This list is by no means exhaustive – it is merely what I used to bring the Criminal Justice system to life in my classroom one semester. This column, however, has inspired me to create a more comprehensive website of teaching resources akin to the CROW Teaching of Social Psychology website. Please feel free to send feedback and suggestions to appleby_sc@mercer.edu.

To see how I organized the class and used these resources, check out the syllabus here. Because my class is a General Education class, we discussed a different part of the Criminal Justice system each week. Many of these resources, however, serve multiple purposes and can be used in a more in-depth class as well.

Each week students were required to answer a set of guided questions to prepare for class activities and discussion (idea credit: Eric Noles). Given the wide variety of majors and interests in the class, I tried not to guide discussions too much and simply see what parts of the system captured their interests and go from there.
Memoirs

*Writing My Wrongs* by Shaka Senghor
- The audiobook is narrated by Senghor himself, who is formerly incarcerated, which students felt really brought the story to life more so than reading it.
- This text was assigned over the course of a few weeks at the start of the semester when we were discussing topics such as *What are prisons for?* and *Why do people commit crime?*

*Becoming Ms. Burton* by Susan Burton and Cari Lynn
- Susan Burton, who herself is formerly incarcerated, details her life and what lead her to create *A New Way of Life*, a non-profit geared at helping women re-enter society after prison.
- This text was assigned at the end of the semester when we were discussing things like *Victims & Victimization, Rehabilitation*, and *Restorative Justice*

*Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson
- Memoir of Civil rights lawyer and Equal Justice Initiative founder Bryan Stevenson
- In my course, I assigned shorter interviews with Stevenson (due to time constraints); the entire text and/or sections could be used to bring a variety of issues to life, including wrongful convictions, the death penalty, and the process of litigating civil rights issues.

Podcasts

*Ear Hustle*
A podcast produced inside San Quinten Prison
- I assigned some specific episodes (e.g., the one on restorative justice), but at other times I let them choose. Students said this podcast helped humanize incarcerated persons.

*Serial: Season 3*
Sarah Keonig and colleagues spent a year documenting the daily happenings in the Cleveland Courts
- This season came out in the middle of the semester, but I have filed it away for the next time I teach the course. In contrast to the first season of Serial that followed an unusual case, this season follows the typical courtroom flow of cases and brings to light complex justice issues including the power of judges, the challenges of court fines, and the relationship between police and community members.

*Justice in America*
Interviews with experts in the field on relevant topics such as plea bargains, prison abolition, and juvenile justice, as well as with formerly incarcerated men and women; hosted by Josie Duffey Rice and Clint Smith
- This format made experts feel accessible to students and the hosts do such a great job breaking down the issues that I could replace some textbook-type readings with podcast episodes.

Various WNYC Podcasts

*The Worst Thing We’ve Ever Done*
Interview with Bryan Stevenson about the creation of the Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice

*Caught: The Lives of Juvenile Justice*
Hear firsthand from children about their first contact with the juvenile justice system

Documentaries

*The House I Live In*
Documents the collateral consequences of the War on Drugs
- I used this film to jump start the semester and get students to re-examine what they “knew” about the criminal justice system and the people ensnared in it.

*13th*
Ava DuVernay draws a direct line from Slavery to Mass Incarceration
- This documentary was used toward the end of the semester to help “bring it all together.”

*Released: When Does the Sentence End?*
Follows formerly incarcerated men and women as they try to re-integrate into society
- This 45 min film was produced by the US Attorney’s office of North Georgia, so I was able to arrange a (free!) screening and panel discussion with two US Attorneys, the head of the local re-entry organization, and two of the formerly incarcerated men featured in the film. If you’re in Georgia – definitely worth looking into. If not, a similar panel could be created using local experts from diverse roles in the system.
Concrete, Steele, & Paint
Documents a restorative justice art program in a Philadelphia prison

Online Resources
Explainers, the Appeal
Lawyers and legal experts break down complicated Criminal Justice issues
- This resource was offered to students as another source of information when working on their papers

Life Inside, the Marshall Project
Articles about prison life, written by both prison employees and currently incarcerated men and women
- Assigned this for the week two formerly incarcerated men visited class. I let students chose which articles to read and asked them to share with the class

Guest Speakers
- The District Attorney
- Public Defenders
- Local faith leaders
  - Invited the DA, PDs, and faith leaders to come discuss the specific criminal justice needs of our community
- Formerly incarcerated men and women
  - If you have a local re-entry program, they can connect you with speakers; depending on the crimes the speaker was convicted of you may want to get approval of your Dean or Provost first
- US Attorney

- Director of local re-entry program
- Retired Prison Psychologist
- The Rwandan National Debate Team
  - On the off chance they’re visiting your institution (or a nearby one), invite them for a great conversation on justice v. truth and reconciliation

Filed Trips
Court Watching (we watched 3 hours of plea deals)
- Though court is public, it’s good manners to reach out to a local judge – if you are as lucky as we are, the judge will make time to speak with your class afterwards.
  - I had students take detailed notes on this worksheet (credit: Dr. Jennifer Perillo) and look for patterns

Tour of local jail or prison (or both)
- If you can swing both, definitely do it. For us, it was two completely different experiences. Students were asked to listen to 3 episodes of Ear Hustle prior to the tour (students chose episodes)

The Legacy Museum and National Memorial for Peace and Justice
- If you are within an overnight field trip’s distance from Montgomery, AL, I highly recommend taking students. The museum is very interactive, including holograms of re-created slave narratives, and audio and video interviews with currently and formerly incarcerated men and women.

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