



The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program: The Impact OF and ON Formerly Incarcerated Men and Women Involved in Inside-Out Trainings and Workshops

By Kenneth Butler
2024 Social Connectedness Fellow
Samuel Centre for Social Connectedness
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program® is an educational program with an innovative pedagogical approach tailored to effectively facilitate dialogue across differences. Inside-Out courses generally bring together students in a higher education setting (“outside students”) and incarcerated (“inside”) students to study issues of social justice. More than 160 universities have sponsored courses and over 200 prisons and jails have hosted them. However, the Inside-Out methodology has also been used in many other professional settings. (Inside-Out Center, *Training Institutes*)

This research aims to explore the impact of the formerly incarcerated coaches/dialogue partners on the participants of the Inside-Out International Instructor Institute. The study utilized qualitative research methods to gather insights through three focus groups. Purposive sampling was used to select 30 potential participants. 12 participants agreed to participate in the focus groups and I conducted one one-on-one interview.

The findings revealed themes of humanization, personal growth, and community building. The research highlights how intergroup contact with the coaches humanizes individuals who have experienced incarceration. This contact caused personal growth and helped the participants with community building. The impact of the coaches were found to be significant.

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

I am a formerly incarcerated individual. I’ve been involved with the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program since 2018 and have taken approximately 15 courses as both an inside and outside student. I participated as a coach in an in-person training in 2019 while incarcerated at the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco, California. I am a founding member of [Pitzer College’s Inside-Out Pathway-to-BA](#) program. I have been working as a coach/dialogue partner since my release from prison in 2021, and have participated in 20 plus virtual trainings and workshops. My connection to the program would suggest a bias whether conscious or unconscious. However, my position is that my personal story and connection to the program that left an indelible mark on my life should serve as a positive bias. My position in the program should be seen as a benefit as the participants were familiar with the researcher and were potentially more forthcoming in their answers than they would have been with an outsider.

1. INTRODUCTION

This research aims to understand the impact of the coaches on training participants in the Inside-Out Center International Instructor Training Institute. The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program® is an educational program that brings together traditional college students and incarcerated students utilizing an innovative pedagogical approach. This methodology is tailored to facilitate dialogue across the many differences in these populations. (Inside-Out Center) To prepare potential instructors in the Inside-Out methodology, they must be trained to navigate the contexts and communities. A key framework that highlights the impact of this program is the intergroup contact theory. Intergroup contact theory suggests that intergroup contact can lead to prejudice reduction when there is equal status, cooperation among groups, and general support for positive intergroup contact (Ross 2015; Allport 1954).

Inside-Out is education in its most accurate form – “drawing forth,” as the root of “education” suggests. In this exchange behind prison walls, the program creates an environment where a group of “inside” and “outside” students can explore justice issues, drawing forth from one another a deeper understanding of how these issues affect our lives as individuals and as a society. (Pompa & Crabbe, 2018, 1). The Inside-Out praxis is grounded in the belief that our society is strengthened when higher education learning is made widely accessible, and at the same time, when it allows participants to encounter each other as equals, often across profound social barriers.

The training participants range from “graduate student to department chairs, each comes to the program as a teacher” (Conti N. et al. 2013, 166). The coaches in the training sessions are formerly incarcerated alumni who were involved in Inside-Out

during their incarceration or participated in an Inside-Out Class. They are from different parts of the country, as well as from international locations, and have experience with the Inside-Out pedagogy. They are an integral part of the Inside-Out training because of their experience as incarcerated students. The training models an Inside-Out classroom that is a space for dialogue and the coaches are seen by training participants as people who carry “significant authority and moral weight with the dialogic space”. (Conti, N. et.al, 167).

The Inside-Center, based at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is the international hub of The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. The Center directs the program's weeklong instructor training online. The trainings were initially conducted in-person at designated prison facilities around the country. The Inside-Out Center changed its method of conducting trainings to a virtual platform in August 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The virtual training is a comprehensive five-day, 40+ hour intensive program covering everything necessary to develop a course in the Inside-Out model or apply the tools to your respective professional setting. The objective of this study is to determine the coaches' impact on the training participants at the International Instructor Training Institute and to determine if participating in the program fosters belonging and social connectedness.

1.1 Key Questions

1. How did working with the coaches shape your Inside-Out Instructor Training experience?

2. Many Inside-Out Instructor Training Institute graduates talk about the coaches' impact on their training. Can you talk about some of the ways that coaches helped you through your training?
3. Did the Inside-Out Training foster a sense of belonging within the group of educators you did the training with? If so, how?

1.2 Methodology

Employing qualitative research methods, the present research sought to understand the impact of the facilitating coaches on the participants in the trainings. As the researcher, I chose focus groups as a methodology. According to Gundumogula (2021) “focus groups are an extended way of the interview, a more specific in-depth group interview with discussions” (Gundumogula 2021).

I employed a purposive sampling technique to select individuals who had participated in the Inside-Out training. I selected 30 individuals from a list of 315 possible participants, representing 182 colleges/universities, and reflecting 226 disciplines. Each potential participant took the virtual training #69 in August 2020 through training #92 in May 2024.

I sent out 30 interview requests via email to the addresses provided by the Inside-Out Center. I intended to conduct 5 focus groups with 6 people per group with a follow up one-on-one interview with focus group participants; time constraints and participant availability modified this plan. I initially chose 17 women and 13 men, and I received a total of 20 responses; 13 respondents said yes, 7 declined to be interviewed, and the remaining 10 failed to respond.

One of the potential participants who declined suggested the names of some of her colleagues willing to participate. As a result, I ended up with 17 confirmed participants who indicated they were willing to participate. I then sent Doodle Polls to determine the availability of the 17 respondents.¹ The result of the Doodle poll resulted in 13 respondents. One person was only available for only one day which did not coincide with any of the other participants' availability. I therefore settled for the twelve participants.

The revised goal was to have three focus groups with four people per group on Zoom for 60 to 90 minutes. In focus group one there were three men and one woman. But a second woman who had completed the training in person joined the group with her colleague, making a group of five. In focus group two, I facilitated a discussion with two men and one woman (one person failed to show up), and in focus group three, two women and two men participated. Overall, I interviewed a total of 13 people.

Unfortunately, the demographics of the focus group were skewed racially with only one African American and twelve white people. I was only able to complete one one-on-one interview which was with a white woman. Of the thirteen participants, 11 were professors, one was a former outside student in the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, and one was a documentary film producer who also took the training.

1.3 Limitations

- The researcher has a positive bias as someone who has experienced the Inside-Out program first as an inside student and an in-person coach. Then as an

¹ **Doodle** is an online calendar tool for time management and coordinating meetings. It allows users to schedule and make arrangements collaboratively, among other features. Doodle (website). (2024, August 25). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doodle_%28website%29. Accessed on August 30, 2024.

outside student and a coach in the virtual training and finally as a training participant. There may be an unconscious bias on my behalf due to my involvement in the program.

- The sample population is too small and there was a limited amount of time to conduct the research. As this was a summer fellowship, had more time been allowed there could have been more time to recruit participants and gather a more diverse perspective.

2. EVIDENCE & KEY FINDINGS

2.1 Humanization

One of the core themes that emerged from the research was how Inside-Out humanizes individuals. Two participants of the inside-out training pointed out that Inside-Out pedagogy attempts to foster human connection. One participant who took the training in person stated,

[I]t was, I think, the most dehumanizing space I had ever been in where I had some of the most humanizing encounters I've ever had in my life. And that whole experience was, I'm still grappling with it, but it changed my life, it changed my teaching, it changed everything for me. (Theresa, Focus Group #1, July 29, 2024).

The Inside Out program is about more than education, "it's also about humanity and humanizing people and breaking down stereotypes and being able to see someone as a human being" (Alex, Focus Group #3, August 1, 2024). These comments align with Inside-Out's vision that those of us inside and outside of prison can catalyze the kinds of changes that will make our communities more inclusive, just, humane, and socially sustainable (Inside Out Center, 2024, "Vision Statement").

The Inside-Out program exemplifies belonging. According to Samuel (2022), belonging manifests perhaps most obviously through our relationship with people—with one another (xvi). The sentiments are recognized in the statement of one participant who stated,

The Inside-Out [program] is not just about me and my one inside-out class. It's about creating a community of instructors and students, and alumni right who are in support of dismantling systems of oppression, giving people the opportunity not only to learn but to connect and to see each other as human beings. (Barbara, One-on-one interview, August 12, 2024).

For 25-plus years, Inside-Out has been creating spaces of belonging that allow participants to recognize the humanity in one another.

2.2 Personal Growth

The Inside-Out program fosters personal development among participants. All 13 participants shared that the program has been transformational. One participant stated,

It was super transformative to me because it helped me really just let go of this idea that I have to have authority, that I need to prove that I belong here, prove that I have expertise... It just helped me so much, and I will never forget that experience. (Barbara, One-on-one interview, August 12, 2024)

The Inside Out pedagogy operates with an intentionality that requires the instructor to become a facilitator. The instructor provides teaching and training by explaining concepts, while a facilitator helps a group work together to achieve a goal by guiding discussions. The Inside-Out model requires the instructor to move out of the way and let the group do its work (Pompa & Crabbe 2018, p.19). One participant spoke to how Inside-Out impacted him, stating,

I think that sort of approach and that kind of recalibration of the power dynamics, much more towards an egalitarian approach, I think doing inside out, gave me the confidence to, to explore that more and push that more than I probably had before. So, it definitely affected my day-to-day teaching. (James, Focus Group #3, August 1, 2024)

The Inside-Out model is “shaping attitudes and opinions, reshaping attitudes and opinions in ways that we had not anticipated” (Robert, Focus Group #2, July 31, 2024). The program is reimagining the classroom and setting expectations that align with the Inside-Out Mission Statement.² Inside-Out brings together people from different walks of life, allowing all to learn new ways of being from one another, creating a path to social connectedness.

2.3 Community

Inside-Out fosters social connectedness by providing a framework for intergroup contact. It is a model for how individuals from different communities, and economic and cultural backgrounds can share in a learning experience that does not occur traditionally. The program breaks down barriers created by bad actors who believe that certain people are not worthy of belonging in certain spaces.

Inside-Out exemplifies what Samuel (2021) refers to as a “system of belonging” (p. 168). The program creates a “caring classroom—a place where dialogue is free flowing, where the student-teacher relationship is built on reciprocity, and where students bring their truest selves to class” (Samuel 2021, p.168). The environment is conducive to community building and allows people to connect in a way that is not possible in society because of preconceptions. One participant asserted that “there was a really nice feeling of community and definitely kindness towards each other in terms of the process” (Beatrice, Focus Group #2, July 31, 2024).

² Inside-Out’s mission is to create opportunities for people inside and outside of prison to have transformative learning experiences that emphasize collaboration and dialogue, inviting them to take leadership in addressing vital issues of social justice (Inside-Out Center, *Mission Statement*).

Inside-Out invites participants to be their best selves. One participant shared prior experiences with other training programs and found them competitive,

But when I went to the Inside-Out training, it was the opposite. It's like my credibility comes from my openness to be in community with other people who are learning and growing and changing and trying something that they're not familiar with. And I really love that. (Barbara, One-on-one interview, August 12, 2024).

The training prepares instructors to conduct community-based education. This program offers positive results for universities and communities by bringing together people from different walks of life and connecting people who would never typically cross paths in society. One participant commented that the training brought him to the realization that as a facilitator, he was there “to create the learning community, help it come to be and come together so that these people can learn from each other and teach each other” (David, Focus Group #2, July 31, 2024). The program provides a judgment-free space where everyone can speak freely and their perspectives are valued. One participant shared how the icebreaker exercise sets the tone for this. The participant stated,

And so that specific exercise stands out to me because it so easily and quickly generates conversation and vulnerability that it breaks down sort of these anxieties, stereotypes, or whatever feelings that we're carrying with us before we start a class or session and quickly allows us to get to know someone on a baseline level. (Alex, Focus Group #2, July 31, 2024)

The Inside-Out model is designed to build community, belonging and social connectedness.

2.4 Impact of the Coaches

The coaches are an integral part of the training. They are viewed by the training participants as informed sources of knowledge and provide the instructors with valuable

support in the training program. The coaches have taken Inside Out courses and bring that experience to the training. The instructors are in the training to prepare to facilitate a class in a jail or prison and the coaches play a major role in understanding what to expect. One participant stated, “I think the coaches were able to give a student perspective that we wouldn't otherwise have had.” (Karma Rose, Focus Group #3, August 1, 2024). Another instructor stated,

I remember having my mind so blown because I felt so liberated as a teacher. The coaches liberated me as a teacher to just be like, ‘this is what active learning can be.’ Like I can do so much more. And it was like the coaches' leadership around their playfulness, their seriousness, their expertise, like all of it coming together to really play around with what like concrete things to de-center the classroom. (Theresa, Focus Group #1, July 29, 2024).

The coaches are products of Inside-Out. They are former students who have become practitioners of the Inside-Out pedagogy and part of their responsibilities is to model the Inside-Out methodology of inclusive dialogue, collaboration and community-building for training participants. One of the participants stated,

I remember thinking that there was a real generosity of spirit in terms of openness, honesty, communication, the concept of collaboration and how important that is. And just sort of an embodiment of equality and inclusion and that give and take between the coaches and the teachers and what would be to the students, that concept was sort of reinforced, I think, by the coaches. (Beatrice, Focus Group #2, July 31, 2024)

The coaches are representatives of what Inside-Out is designed to do. They represent the outcome of participating in the Inside-Out program and are consummate professionals. The way they show up in the training exemplifies their loyalty to the spirit of Inside-Out. The sentiments are palpable even in a virtual setting. One participant stated, “I would just say that what also really impressed me was how loyal all of these coach alums were to Lori. Like she changed their lives. She changed their world. And there was no question about it” (Annie, Focus Group #1, July 29, 2024). The coaches

are performing the Inside-Out praxis, which is grounded in the belief that our society is strengthened when higher education/learning is made widely accessible, and at the same time, when it allows participants to encounter each other as equals, often across profound social barriers (Inside Out Center, *Inside-Out Praxis*).

2.5 Belonging & Social Connectedness Intergroup Contact Framework

The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program cultivates social connectedness through intergroup contact. The majority of college faculty and undergraduate students are white. The statistics show that 72 percent of faculty are white, and 41 percent of college students ages 18-24 are white (National Center for Education Statistics. 2024). The statistics show that at year end 2022, 32% of persons sentenced to state or federal prison were black, while 31% were white (Carson 2023). These dynamics are prominent in the Inside-Out program. One of the participants declared that “overwhelmingly white females are majority in the classroom, with an inside student population that is overwhelmingly black male” (Robert, Focus Group #2). While these racial disparities are clearly problematic, there’s also an opportunity for community building. These are two groups from different racial, gender, economic and social backgrounds who rarely interact in society and have been historically intentionally made to be skeptical of one another.

Bowman and Brandenberger (2012) found that interpersonal interactions with racial/ethnic diversity, which are highly salient and often novel for college students, are associated with greater cognitive development than interactions with nonracial diversity (192). There are hostile race relations in prison and society. Inside-Out has created a community-based educational environment that aligns with the intergroup contact

theory, which suggests that under the right conditions, increased interracial contact has the potential to improve interracial understanding and promote racial tolerance and harmony (Wenger et al., 2023, Allport, 1954). These trainings are preparing instructors to enter this space with the proper tools that will allow them to facilitate meaningful dialogue that leads to understanding between inside and outside students. This process is an essential tool for fostering belonging among the inside students and social connectedness among outside students who opt to connect classroom learning with real life issues.

3. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

3.1 Track the Long-Term Impact on Formerly Incarcerated Alumni

Inside Out should track the career trajectories of formerly incarcerated students to determine the long-term impact of Inside-Out on the formerly incarcerated alumni. This will provide insights into the long-term impact of Inside Out on its alumni, offering valuable data on the program's transformative potential.

My encounter with this program has left an indelible mark on my life. I have gone on to get a BA degree in Organizational Studies from a prestigious liberal arts college. I was awarded a Fulbright fellowship in Uganda and am currently in a master's program studying public administration. I have been released from incarceration for three years and free of any criminal activities, and I owe it all to this program.

3.2 Expand Research on Participants and Instructors

Broader research should be done on the students and instructors who have participated in Inside-Out to assess how participating in the program has impacted their

personal and professional lives, and why a program like this is essential in bridging the cultural divides in our society.

In July I attended a forum at the Claremont Colleges hosted by the Justice Education Center, where outside students were specifically asked, “What was the biggest takeaway from your experience in the class?” One student responded, “Education breaks boundaries and barriers placed there to create separation in society.” As one of the focus group participants suggested, “It’d be interesting to see the educational background, not necessarily the decoration, but the K-12 experience of the folks who choose to teach inside” (Robert, Focus Group #2, July 31, 2024). It would be a great benefit to understand what brings people to the program. What are the character traits of the instructors and students that come into these classes?

3.3 Implement Inside-Out Pedagogy Across More Educational Settings

Inside-Out pedagogy should be offered in all aspects of education throughout incarcerated adult and youth populations. Expanding its reach can further contribute to the humanization and transformation of incarcerated individuals and those working with them. For the past 3 years, I have been going inside adult and youth institutions, facilitating classes for the Prison Education Project. I use the Inside-Out methodology in those classes and it has been very impactful on the inside population. The model of creating a learning space that fosters community and mutual respect can go a long way in changing this population's view of the world and alleviating some of the attitudes that lead to deviant behavior.

3.4 Evaluate the Program's Impact on Correctional Institutions

Research should be done to assess the impact of Inside-Out on the correctional system and the culture of the prison's general population where Inside-Out classes are offered. This should include examining the impact of Inside-Out on prison environments, inmate relationships, and how the program influences broader correctional practices. My Inside-Out experience changed my perspective on the way I view race relations. It allowed me to connect socially with students of all races in the prison. The program was the catalyst for changing race relations at the California prison where I was introduced to Inside-Out. As students began to bond inside the classroom, the energy spread out to the general population, and community-building ensued. This community has expanded outside prison walls and we now collaborate as Inside-Out coaches and other community engagement activities. A network approach should examine the relationship between race, racial attitudes, and friendship in an innovative and ideal research setting: a prison (Wenger et al., 2023, 21).

4. CONCLUSION

The research highlights the role of formerly incarcerated coaches in the success of Inside-Out program training. Inside-Out utilizes a unique pedagogy that encourages individuals to recognize the humanity of all individuals. The integral role of the coaches—who embody the spirit of the Inside-Out methodology—enhances the training experience. Their lived experience and insights provide valuable support for participants, offering unique perspectives that add value to the training process. The coaches are a powerful model of the program's impact on the inside students. Facilitation by the coaches fosters personal development among participants and

promotes social connectedness through intergroup contact. This short research project highlights the impact of coaches who play a pivotal role in preparing instructors for a unique teaching experience inside a carceral setting.

The statements of the focus group participants emphasize that the training is enriched by the presence of the coaches who previously participated in the program as inside students, i.e. formerly incarcerated. As one of the participants stated,

I think for me, working with the coaches really reinforced in a very direct way just how much the inside students would be bringing to this. And just how much, how rich, how deep their experience was as something that they would be learning and teaching within this interactive process. I guess I thought I knew this before that. But you know, experiencing that really directly during the training from the coaches was very affirming of that idea. (Focus group #2)

This sentiment from the participant recognizes that the coaches offer a perspective that the training participants could not gain from the academic facilitators involved in Inside-Out as instructors. Additionally, the research suggests that Inside-Out cultivates belonging and social connectedness. By bringing together people from different walks of life, the program creates a learning community that defies the stereotypical notions of incarcerated people portrayed in the media. For example, television shows like *Oz*, a 1997 drama that depicts a fictional level 4 maximum security state prison where inmates and correctional officers inside the Oswald State Correctional Facility battle for power and survival amid warring factions and explosive acts of retribution. The Inside-Out program allows people to meet and hear the perspectives of diverse voices on issues that affect our society. This learning environment humanizes the individuals through dialogue and mutual respect.

The Inside-Out program, through its innovative pedagogy and the committed involvement of the coaches, fosters a space that promotes human connection, personal

growth, and community cohesion. The insights gained from this research affirm the value of the Inside-Out model in creating an experience that extends beyond the classroom, contributing to a more inclusive and empathetic society.

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