DOI: 10.1111/teth.12466

ARTICLE

WILEY

How programs in prisons are challenging the who, where, how, and what of theological education

Sarah C. Jobe

Duke University Divinity School

Abstract

This paper claims that programs in prisons are challenging the very who, where, how, and what of theological education. The author draws on research from the fields of pedagogy and prison studies, nearly a decade of experience teaching master's level seminary-style classes in prison, and the findings of a two-year cohort of prison educators convened by the Association of Theological Schools for their Educational Models and Practices Project. Addressing displacement as a learning strategy, classroom diversity, the use of student experience, narrative grading strategies, and classroom ritual, the author shows how the teaching strategies emerging from prison classrooms provide vibrant models for the theological academy at large.

KEYWORDS

classroom ritual, experience, incarceration, narrative grading, pedagogy, prison teaching, theological education, theology

1 | INTRODUCTION

> *Critical thinking involves first discovering the who, what, when, where, and how of things – finding the answers to those eternal questions of the inquisitive child – and then utilizing that knowledge in a manner that enables you to determine what matters most.– bell hooks*

In 2008, I founded Project TURN, a partnership program in which Duke Divinity School (DDS) offers graduate-level, seminary-style classes in several North Carolina prisons. Since that time, I have traveled each week to one of North Carolina's prisons with a DDS faculty member and approximately ten DDS students to study alongside some ten to twelve incarcerated students (Jobe, 2012). In doing so, I have jumped into a tradition of theological education pioneered by New York Theological Seminary at Sing Sing Prison in 1982 (Erickson, 2002), taken up by New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary at Angola Prison in 1995 (Hallett, Hays, Johnson, Jang, & Duwe, 2017), and adapted to

 © 2019 John Wiley & Sons Ltd

an "inside-out" model by Vanderbilt Divinity School at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution in 2002. As graduates of these seminary programs have spread the word about their transformational experiences of theological study on the inside, seminary programs in prisons have begun to increase nationwide.

In 2015, The Association of Theological Schools (ATS) named "Programs in Prison" as one of 16 emerging trends in theological education within their Educational Models and Practices Project.[1] These 16 trends were selected as developments that could significantly impact the shape of the theological academy in coming decades. ATS convened educators from nine member schools that are all engaged in some form of prison education, and representatives from those schools studied together for two years on a peer-learning model. As a participant in that cohort, I was honored to learn about the programs of those nine schools in addition to the programs of another eight schools that we researched (Jobe, 2017, 1–2). Across the wide spectrum of institutions in our cohort, one educational principle emerged as foundational and universally shared – namely, that theological education in prisons is and should be transformational for everyone involved. This paper takes that claim one step further. Bringing together my own experiences of prison teaching, the findings of the ATS Educational Models and Practices Project, and research from the fields of pedagogy and prison studies, this paper addresses how programs in prisons are challenging assumptions about the very who, where, how, and what of theological education to yield vital and generative sites within increasingly unstable institutions.

Before unpacking that claim, I want to share more about my own, very narrow slice of this wider movement. My prison teaching experience has all been located within a double-wide trailer turned prison chapel called The Hope Center. The prison is a women's minimum custody work camp at North Carolina Correctional Institute for Women (NCCIW) in Raleigh, North Carolina. When I began this work, I was a few years out of seminary and had never imagined teaching in prison myself. For years, I had heard about classes at Vanderbilt Divinity School that were taught at a local men's prison. These stories came as doctoral students, Methodist ministers, and visiting faculty migrated between Vanderbilt and DDS, and their stories were always the same: people reported that those classes had been the most impactful of their seminary experiences. I had wondered if such a transformational program could ever take root at my own seminary, and in 2008 I was approached by School for Conversion, a local nonprofit that had some modest start-up funding, to see if a partnership between DDS and the North Carolina Department of Public Safety (NCDPS) might be possible. I jumped at the opportunity.

NCCIW was the first prison to welcome Project TURN in the spring semester of 2009, and DDS has offered one course there each semester since that time. With the exception of the first course, which I co-taught with another DDS alum, each class has been taught by a DDS professor to a classroom comprising a roughly equal number of incarcerated students from NCCIW and non-incarcerated students from DDS. The prison system has requested that students in any given classroom be single-gendered, so my own prison-teaching at NCCIW is with groups of women. Students learn alongside one another as peers, doing the same assignments and receiving the same forms of feedback. Non-incarcerated students are asked to hand-write even their longest assignments in solidarity with their incarcerated peers who typically do not have access to computers. Classes have covered a wide range of topics from basics like biblical exegesis and preaching, to courses on spiritual autobiography, feminist theology, domestic violence and the Bible, comparative religions, and carceral studies.

In addition to the course content for the semester, each TURN class makes space for relationship-building and wisdom-sharing across social divisions of race, class, educational access, and carceral status. We expect the theological content of any class to be shaped by the experience of having learned it inside of a prison across these social divisions, and much of my role is about tending to classroom dynamics so that such relational and contextual learning can flourish. As a site coordinator, I make sure that non-incarcerated participants have the training and clearances

[1]This paper would not have been possible without my experience of studying with the cohort of prison educators convened by ATS as a part of the Educational Models and Practices Project (EMP). I am deeply grateful to Stephen Graham, my cohort peers, and all those who are taking the time to think about how theological education is shifting to meet the needs of a shifting world. The EMP Final Report can be accessed in full at https://www.ats.edu/resources/current-initiatives/educational-models-and-practices-theological-education.

they need to enter the prison. I help professors modify their syllabi to fit the prison context, and I serve as a resource to all students as they navigate this new educational experience – sometimes offering extra academic help and sometimes offering a space to process the dynamics of learning in prison. I also co-teach and grade alongside our visiting DDS professors, just as a teaching assistant or co-teacher might do in a traditional classroom setting.

One significant difference between our incarcerated and non-incarcerated students is that non-incarcerated DDS students are taking these classes for course credit toward a degree while incarcerated students are taking the same classes for credit toward a certificate. ATS schools seeking to offer seminary education in prisons face the challenge that most incarcerated persons do not have an undergraduate degree, and yet ATS schools are only accredited to provide graduate-level education. Some schools address this challenge by forming a partnership with an undergraduate institution in order to offer undergraduate course credit to incarcerated students. Other schools have opted instead to offer certificates to incarcerated students in order to track and honor the completed seminary education (Jobe, 2017, 1–2, 6). Duke falls into this latter certificate model in which incarcerated students receive documentation for each course completed that can be reported on resumes, on applications for future academic work, and for consideration of things like parole and increased custody levels. After completing eight courses, incarcerated students are awarded DDS's "Certificate of Achievement in Theological Education." Between 2015 and 2017, five incarcerated women received this honor and were permitted to travel to Duke's Closing Convocation for public recognition of their academic achievements.

Amanda was the first woman to achieve this certificate, and she arrived at Duke's Closing Convocation in the last months of a sixteen-year prison sentence. She had been asked by the DDS Chaplain to act as one of the Convocation communion servers, a role typically reserved for graduating seniors. After receiving her certificate to a standing ovation, Amanda offered the body of Christ to a congregation that included her fellow students, her own prison chaplain, and the warden of the prison at which she was serving her sentence. As Amanda inhabited the role of a theologically-trained worship-leader from within the context of her own incarceration, she challenged everyone present to understand incarcerated people not simply as those in need of ministry but as minsters in training, as the future of the church.

2 | CHALLENGING THE "WHO" OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

In their book *Learning as a Way of Leading*, Stephen Preskill and Stephen Brookfield write, "Only when there is a kind of radical openness to the full panoply of perspectives it contains can a community achieve its full potential" (2009, 192). While the schools in our ATS cohort represent wild diversity of denominations, types of institutions, and theo-political beliefs, we all hold one thing in common: our student bodies have traditionally comprised free people. Currently incarcerated individuals are largely missing from the theological academy; thus, the theological sense-making of incarcerated people is missing in the crafting of theological systems at large. Project TURN operates with the belief that theology is impoverished when whole groups of people are missing from the sites where theological meaning is being made. The primary sites of theological production reside in church and academy, or some synergy between the two, and incarcerated people are rarely found at those sites. If God is the creator of all, then one's sense of who God is and how God works in the world must incorporate the wisdom of all. This means changing the "who" of theological education to include currently incarcerated people.

At a very basic level, our weekly circles of learning at the Hope Center try to be that wider table of theological sense-making. Who God is becomes contested and fruitfully complicated as traditionally accepted perspectives are allowed the same respect and airtime as traditionally excluded perspectives. Creating a classroom environment in which respect and airtime is equitably distributed is not a straightforward endeavor, especially when people have radically different experiences of education. The half of our students who have come to the classroom by way of application and acceptance into Duke Divinity School have, by and large, traveled a different educational path than the half of our students who have come to our classroom by way of trial, conviction, and sentencing into the

Department of Public Safety. There are two major factors in the difference of those paths that shape prison classrooms that are worth naming here: first, the way in which socio-economics impacts both incarceration and education, and second, the direct relationship between lack of education and imprisonment.

Who are the students in a prison classroom? Prison educator Raphael Ginsberg explains of his incarcerated students that "for the vast majority of my students, my class is their first college experience. Many dropped out of high school and earned their GEDs while in prison. Most of my students have not been in a classroom for years, and for many it has been decades" (2014, 169). Overwhelmingly, under-resourced people and racial minorities are incarcerated at higher rates than their middle-class, white counterparts, with young African-American men being the most disproportionately affected nation-wide (Mauer & King, 2007).

The demographics that are over-represented in prisons are similar to the demographics of adult learners, often taught by community colleges and grassroots education movements in free communities.[2] In some important ways, incarcerated students face the same challenges that adult learners coming out of poverty as racial-minorities face in free settings as well. Preskill and Brooks describe this set of challenges from within their own context of grassroots education in a way that resonates with my incarcerated students' experiences:

> *Many people will comment on how their schooling discouraged them or made them doubt their ability. Others will focus on the liability of being the first person in their family to attend college, a circumstance that made the adjustment to higher education particularly challenging. Still others will disclose how lack of economic means forced them to seek out employment during schooling, which in turn disadvantaged them academically. Others will note that the stark contrasts between their home culture and the culture of the educational institution they attended caused them considerable distress, what one of us (Brookfield, 2006) has described as cultural suicide. (2009, 106).*

Under-resourced students are over-represented in prisons. Just as lack of resources impacts education on the outside as described above, lack of resources also impacts education on the inside. However, this dynamic is further compounded inside prison classrooms by what is commonly called the school-to-prison pipeline: namely, a direct correlation between incarceration and zero-tolerance policies that eject students from systems of primary and secondary education (Heitzeg, 2009; Western & Pettit, 2010). In 2005, black Americans without college education were incarcerated at double the rate of black Americans with a college education (Drucker, 2011, 155). In every demographic category, people with lower levels of education are incarcerated at higher rates than their socio-economic counterparts who made it further through high school and college. Practically speaking, this means that in a prison classroom, students have not simply had less education, but they are more likely to have had significantly negative experiences in classrooms, including full-blown expulsion from systems of secondary education (Kuhlmann, 2006).

While the above dynamics of racial and class discrimination are one primary force at work in prison classrooms, it is also the case that post-secondary education prison programs draw to the fore the sometimes-overlooked diversity of incarcerated people themselves. While many of my students come with negative classroom experiences, others come to our program with quite the opposite. In an environment that feels chaotic and unfriendly, some of my incarcerated students apply for the DDS classes because education was always a safe and friendly place for them prior to incarceration. Engaging in study while in prison feels like a harbinger of normalcy and an affirmation of their own intellectual gifts. Additionally, those who achieved BA's and master's degrees prior to incarceration are drawn to theological education programs in prison as one of the few offerings that truly challenges them to grow beyond their own intellectual and spiritual boundaries. My incarcerated students who were practicing lawyers, social workers, nurses, and business women – with all the required advanced degrees – are a constant challenge to the idea that our outside DDS students introduce the need for classroom differentiation. Similarly, I have women in class who

[2]While the body of scholarly literature on teaching in prisons is still nascent in the theological academy, there is a wide body of work reflecting on such teaching from other disciplines, particularly from prison educators in programs offering GED's, AA's, and technical certifications. *The Journal of Correctional Education* and *The Radical Teacher* are two journals with particularly robust histories of pedagogical reflection on prison teaching writ large.

are serving life sentences who achieved their bachelor's degrees while in prison some ten or twenty years ago. These women take our classes hungry for any available next step in their own educations.

In order to create a classroom environment in which all voices are welcomed into the process of learning and crafting theology, educators must negotiate a complex matrix in which systemic forces disadvantage many incarcerated students while acknowledging the individuality and diversity of incarcerated persons. For me, these measures start with recruitment. When I began teaching at NCCIW, I depended on prison administrators to place posters about each class around the prison, and I received applications from those people who had seen the posters, taken the initiative to apply, and made it through the prison's screening process around disciplinary infractions. During those first two years, we often could not fill our ten spaces reserved for incarcerated students in each class. In 2011, I had the opportunity to become a part-time chaplain at NCCIW, and I slowly realized that most incarcerated women had no imagination for themselves as students. Many women reported that they would watch the posters go up and down for years before gearing up the courage to apply for a course. I realized that in order for all people to come to the table of theological sense-making, some people would have to be explicitly invited and individually encouraged, as a counter-measure to life-long histories in which they had been narrated as academic failures or recent experiences of criminalization in which they were branded as a societal risk and problem. When I began this process of encouragement and re-narration, the Duke Divinity classes grew in popularity and enrollment. In the last five years, each class has had a waitlist and more incarcerated applicants than we can accommodate.

Changing the "who" of theological education has a transformational impact that snowballs to affect the where, how, and what of theological education. If incarcerated students are included in the student body, the "where" of theological education must then move to where incarcerated students are (as they, by and large, cannot move to where the academy is). Changing the students and sites of theological reflection then impact how theology is taught, and a few of those pedagogical shifts will be discussed in detail below. Finally, as the who, where, and how of theological sense-making change over time, I have found that the "what," the very content of theology and biblical interpretation, can come to shift in profound ways as well. Who we teach matters.

3 | CHALLENGING THE "WHERE" OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

In order for Duke Divinity School to expand the table of theological sense-making to encompass incarcerated people, professors and students have to be willing to travel. Durham no longer has a prison in our city limits, but we have four state facilities and a federal prison complex in the cities and counties surrounding us. Each week the professor and students who come to NCCIW drive from Durham to Raleigh, a 35-minute commute that stretches into 60 minutes in the bumper-to-bumper traffic of rush hour. While it would be more convenient to DDS participants to hold the class at another time of day, all women assigned to our minimum custody work camp are at work assignments until the evenings. Many of our incarcerated students are working jobs off-site from the prison and are spending 1–3 hours each day on the city bus doing their own commutes. Most of us, incarcerated and not, arrive at the prison on Thursday nights after a long day of work and travel.

Once we have all made it to the parking lot, there is still significant effort to be made to get to the classroom. Incarcerated students returning from their work sites are checked to make sure that all items on their person match the list of items that was created when they left the prison that morning, and a few residents are randomly selected for strip searches and/or drug tests. Our non-incarcerated participants submit to a similar (though less invasive) review of the items on their person – making sure that any items coming in match the list of items approved on the memo provided to officers about the program. Each non-incarcerated person then submits to a pat and frisk protocol in which she faces the door while an officer runs the back of her hands over shoulders, under arms, along the bra line, in between legs, and pats the ankles. Every person who arrives to class on Thursday evenings has made significant bodily sacrifice to be there.

There are also logistical and institutional challenges to transforming prisons into sites of higher education. In order for incarcerated students to be enrolled in college or graduate level degrees while incarcerated, institutions of higher learning must be willing to name prisons as satellite campuses or secondary sites with their accrediting bodies (Jobe, 2017, 1). In order for non-incarcerated students to be accepted into penal institutions, they must submit to and pass a criminal background check. In North Carolina's system, individuals must be one year free of arrests, incarceration, or community corrections to even be considered for volunteer status.

Once all participants are approved, professors experience distinctive limits to academic freedom as syllabi and reading lists are screened by prison officials and judged, not according to academic standards, but according to banned book lists and the safety and security needs of the institution. While banned book lists generally focus on true crime books and writings of an explicit sexual nature, professors can be surprised to find that books on basic writing techniques, various foreign language dictionaries, certain encyclopedias, books about the Black Panther movement, and Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* are also banned in many states.[3] Professors also face the reality that their incarcerated students have limited libraries and no internet access, and thus very limited ability to do their own outside research. Research and reading materials, by and large, must be imported into the prison to create an environment conducive to learning.

While materials are limited, so is time, space, and access to one another. Classes typically only meet once a week, and incarcerated students generally have no way of communicating with their professors outside of those times. I have occasionally created office hours for professors to come into the facility outside of class time when large assignments are due, but those office hours are aberrations to the norms of the program. When students and professors are together, prison classrooms are frequently interrupted by booming speaker systems, safety and security checks by officers, "count times," and calls for individual students to report for medical checks and medicine distribution that often cannot be completed at a later time. The structures of control and discipline are often at odds with structures conducive to learning.

While I have focused on logistical barriers to learning, prison education is sometimes deterred in a more traumatic fashion. I will never forget the semester in which we had been approved to distribute basic art supplies for the completion of a final "creative interpretation" of a biblical text. An incarcerated woman I will call Tina had been a particular advocate for this final project. She was a skilled and passionate artist, and I had always been awed by the beauty she could eek out of the approved markers and paper to which she had regular access. As we gathered for our penultimate class, I noticed that very few of our incarcerated students were showing up. As I was about to inquire about possible reasons for the absences with those who were present, Tina burst into the trailer with tears streaming down her face. A flurry of stories tumbled out from her and the other residents about how they had been questioned that week about their possession of the additional supplies. Many had their lockers tossed, projects crushed and confiscated, and some had been threatened with write-ups and time in segregation. Tina had just been strip searched immediately prior to class because of the set of oil pastels that she had been issued through our program. Not only had my best efforts at creating space for life-giving work been thwarted, they had become the catalyst of traumatic experiences for our incarcerated students.

In writing about how a crisis in teaching can open to new possibility, Miriam Perkins reflects on how the etymology of "catastrophe" implies a turning over. Catastrophe "means an upset of what is expected and was originally used to mean a plot twist. To emerge into the unexpected is not always terrible, though these words have evolved to imply ill fortune (Solnit, 2009, 10)" (2017, 347). Similarly, the word "emergency comes from emerge, to rise out of," and Perkins challenges educators to imagine how new possibilities and new pedagogies can emerge from individually and institutionally precarious situations (Perkins, 2017, 346–349). Precarious situations, emergency, and catastrophe are immediately and visibly present in prison education and often prompt prison educators to re-vision their role in creating the conditions necessary for a community of learning to form in each classroom. The prison context

[3]For an example of a recent banned book list from North Carolina Department of Public Safety, see http://www.bookstoprisoners.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/NC_complete_banned_list.pdf accessed on January 15, 2018.

prompts a certain empathy and active interest in the material condition of students' lives that professors are sometimes not as quick to extend to traditional students on campus. This interactive, inquisitive, and compassionate relationship between professors and students is what bell hooks calls "engaged pedagogy," and I would suggest that this sort of engaged pedagogy emerges naturally when educators are faced with the routine crises inherent in relocating theological education to prison (2010, 19).

I would like to name two specific ways in which moving the "where" of theological education to prison becomes a surprising resource for learning, but I name these with a degree of trepidation. Much of the rest of this paper is a reflection on how promising pedagogical practices emerge precisely at sites of systemic harm to incarcerated people. Intrinsic to such a reflection is an irony, a possibility, and a risk. There is a fine line between working internal to a system in order to transform its injustices into spaces for human flourishing and work that ends up sustaining the life of prison systems themselves. I join most prison educators I know in the dis-ease of this complicity. That being said, I have seen how changing the "where" of theological education to prison invigorates learning by stimulating a re-valuing of the classroom through the simple act of displacement and through the way in which education becomes a valued commodity in an environment of scarcity.

Robert Scott reflects on how displacement has been historically used by radical educators to encourage "critical distance for reflection" that can be difficult to achieve in the familiarity of traditional settings (2013, 24). He writes, "displaced from the participants' natural home environment, people can discover new potentials precisely because no one is in their 'comfort zone'" (Scott, 2013, 24). A change in setting has the ability to open students to new possibilities for learning, regardless of the site of the displacement (Horton, 1989; Horton & Freire, 1990). In my own doctoral studies, I experienced the fecundity of displacement when a small group of students decided that we wanted to learn under a scholar who lived an hour away and taught for a neighboring university. Our study with him involved a series of displacements: we drove two hours to be with him; he welcomed us into his home as a classroom space since there was not an institutional space in which to be hosted; dining table became desk and transformed back to dining table as he fed us elegantly simple bread and bean dishes before our trek back to our home city. This series of displacements rendered the learning sought-after, valued, and worked-for in a way that our on-campus classes never quite achieved. I found that I was more likely to complete readings and come to class prepared, knowing that we were all making an extra effort to be present.

A similar dynamic is operative in the displacement of theological education to prison, but I would suggest that the re-valuing of the classroom is deepened more than in other displacements precisely because of the ways in which prisons are not naturally conducive sites for learning, as described above. Scott writes how the isolation within prisons can create a concentrated classroom experience (2013, 23). The limited time that students and teachers have together creates an urgency and an energy to the classroom experience – if issues are not addressed in class, they must be pushed to the following week. With no access to email, internet, cell phones, or other avenues for discourse, classroom conversation becomes a valued commodity (Scott, 2013, 24.) Professors in our program are often surprised at how easy the conversation flows in prison classrooms; participants often seem quicker to share and engage than in on-campus classrooms. Scott suggests that this is not so much about the specific teacher or the specific students in any given class but rather about the way that the prison as a site of certain scarcities renders the classroom a rare and valued site of abundant discourse and positive relationality. Incarcerated students in our program often report that their two hours in Duke Divinity class each week are the only times in which they can "forget they are in prison" and be treated like "real people." This creates added incentive to complete assignments and come to class prepared to engage. The classroom is re-valued as a site of vitality, relationality, potential, and growth as it stands in contrast to the scarcity of those things elsewhere in a prison landscape.

4 | CHALLENGING THE "HOW" OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

When theological educators come to prison, they face diverse classrooms with a variety of learning styles and learning histories in a precarious institution. Over and over again in our ATS cohort, prison educators reported that

attention to this specific "who" and "where" prompted them to re-evaluate their own pedagogical practices to ensure the best possible chances for a successful educational experience. For example, programs in prison prioritize peer learning models and various forms of prior learning assessments, both of which give credit – whether class credit or simply authority and legitimacy – to life experience as the stuff of theological reflection and ministerial training. Programs in prisons enact differentiated pedagogies in each class session in order to address a wide variety of learning styles and learning histories. This means varying class time between large group discussion, small group work, lectures, and moments for individuals to engage the material silently. Differentiation means providing notes and worksheets alongside lectures and assigning a wide variety of genres to communicate course content – from academic articles and monographs to spiritual memoirs, news articles, and poetry. It also means using a variety of assignments to assess a student's grasp of theological content – from formal academic papers to letters from prison, from a variety of art forms to sermons and testimonies.

There are limits to what differentiation can achieve in a classroom in which some students have recently achieved GED's and other students are in the final year of a second advanced degree. We have found that there is a basic facility in reading and writing necessary for students to succeed in our courses, and our application process includes two essays that assess whether or not students have that basic facility. But the oft-stated concern that graduate level material will be "watered-down" through the addition of students into the classroom who have not yet had the opportunity to achieve a bachelor's degrees is a concern that, while understandable, has simply not been my experience of these diverse classrooms. Rather than dilution of course content, I have found that a diverse classroom actually sharpens, distills, and concentrates theological learning. Divinity school students and professors are challenged to speak beyond technical theological language and the shorthand that arises under the presumption of shared belief and experience. In finding new linguistic patterns, new genres, and new pedagogical methods to communicate old truths, theological understanding is deepened, sharpened, and sometimes even shifted for participants from all levels of ability and prior educational experience.

While the presence of incarcerated students is often the catalyst for differentiating teaching methods in this way, *all* students in our classroom report that they learned quickly and easily and that our classrooms were sites of educational comfort. Our Duke students report with surprise that their basic writing skills improve in our classes and that they never expected that their most comfortable academic environment in which to share their ideas would be in a prison. Perhaps this is because we often presume more commonality in our on-campus classrooms than is actually there (Jennings, 2014). ATS has spent the last few years highlighting the ways in which seminaries are becoming more and more diverse, and ATS predicts that seminaries will continue to see increasing enrollment from racial minorities and from students of diverse socio-economic backgrounds.[4] Increasingly, understanding *who* we teach matters for *how* we teach not only in prison classrooms but in the theological academy at large. Given the precarious national landscape and the increasing diversity of traditional seminary classrooms, theological educators are being called to enact just the sort of engaged pedagogies that prison educators have been challenged to enact for decades – to give attention to crafting a classroom community, to acknowledge how trauma and struggle external to the classroom affects learning, to consider what might be standing in the way of student success and address it with respect and ferocity. As I turn to explore three pedagogical practices emerging from my own prison-teaching context – life experience as theological data, narrative grading, and ritual – I offer these not simply as a glimpse into an alternative teaching context but as fruitful pedagogies for the wider work of theological education.

4.1 | Weaving text and experience

In every Project TURN classroom, we have three stated objectives: (1) for students to learn course content and increase written and oral communication skills, (2) for students to experience their own personal, spiritual growth

[4]For an introduction to this topic, see the report on Daniel Aleshire's Opening Address at the 50th Biennial Meeting of ATS: https://www.ats.edu/uploads/resources/publications-presentations/colloquy-online/biennial-meeting-program-highlights.pdf

and development, and (3) to form friendships across the lines of race, class, and carceral status. Because of these objectives, we make ample and intentional space in every classroom for students to share their life experiences. As bell hooks writes, "a powerful way we connect with a diverse world is by listening to the different stories we are told. These stories are a way of knowing. Therefore, they contain both power and the art of possibility. We need more stories" (2010, 53). Sharing stories, hooks explains, creates a community in which students feel comfortable enough to engage in mind, body, and spirit. This community of welcome becomes the foundation of learning, the conditions for the possibility of learning to occur. But sharing experiences is not simply something we do to build classroom community. Increasingly, I have come to understand how my students' life experiences are themselves a form of theological knowing. We are warned by hooks not to let student experience overtake the discussion of readings in a classroom (2010, 56), but prison teaching instead encourages us to re-evaluate the very nature of experience, to re-think the readings that we assign, and to creatively re-tool the process by which we weave the two together.

Even if a student cannot name the terms of systematic theology, every student comes to the classroom filled with ideas about who God might be and the role of God in her own life and world. During the prison intake process, individuals are literally stripped of all personal belongings with the exception of their sacred texts. The very process of incarceration encourages incarcerated people to become biblical and theological sense-makers from the moment the bars shut behind them. When we present theological truths or biblical interpretation in the classroom, our students are comparing and contrasting those to their own experiences and prior beliefs, whether we give space to acknowledge that openly or not. When we give space for individuals to share their prior experiences, we bring those experiences to the table of theological sense-making, opening the experiences to critical reflection and allowing critical reflection to be informed by individual experiences.

To welcome "life experience" into theological reflection is not simply to allow individual students time to share their stories. Rather, welcoming experience forces educators to re-evaluate the types of readings that are being assigned in order to offer written accounts of particular sets of experiences for communal class reflection. Educator Raphael Ginsberg uses the television show "The Wire" as a cultural artifact that presents a certain sort of experience. Some students can relate directly to it and others cannot, but it provides a common set of stories that Ginsberg then teaches students to analyze through the lens of social theory (Ginsberg, 2013). Particularly in diverse classrooms, the act of comparing and contrasting life experiences with theories or experiences presented in texts has revelatory potential as students learn to see through the differing perspectives of fellow students whom they have come to know and respect (Preskill & Brooks, 2009, 106–107).

Welcoming experience also impacts the reading lists that we craft for our classes. Theological reflection that prioritizes experience is sometimes dismissed as "not-quite-standard" by being labeled feminist, womanist, or having some other adjective of identity politics appended to them. This sort of naming discourages experiential theology from becoming the backbone or foundation of a theological curriculum while encouraging a sparse selection of such texts as addendums to texts that might be considered more "standard." Miriam Perkins, (2017) shares a powerful story about how she rethought one of her course reading lists in an attempt to honor classroom diversity but realized quickly that she had an internal impulse to add no more than one womanist thinker to any given "standard" syllabus. She writes, "it was a challenging moment of self-awareness as a theologian and educator: a moment to recognize an inertia toward moderation instilled by white privilege and its resultant subtle resistance to visionary change" (2017, 346). In that moment, Perkins scraps the entire reading list and crafts a new one that honors a broader range of student experience and forms of theological sense-making, and she reports that the learning of the semester was radically and positively expanded.

As we make space for student experiences to be named in the classroom and prioritize readings that make sense of experience, we also have to actively work through our assignments and in class activities "to create a feedback loop between texts and experiences" (Burlein, 2011, 142–143). One of my most powerful mentors in this form of teaching is a preaching professor named Chuck Campbell. He was coming to teach an introductory preaching course at NCCIW, and he was mindful that he was teaching preaching to a group of women in the South, many of whom had grown up being told that they could not preach. When we sat down to discuss the reading list and sets of sermons

we would engage, I suggested that the students might want to hear some of his own preaching. "Oh no," he exclaimed, "We are only reading and listening to women this semester!" I found myself shocked. Similar to Perkins's revelation described above, I realized that it had never occurred to me to create a syllabus with *only* women preachers and homiletical theorists. Even as a staunch supporter of women preaching, my own entrenched sexism had limited my imagination for what a reading list that honored women's preaching might look like.

Armed with this syllabus, Chuck welcomed us into the preaching class on the first day by asking each of us to share a moment at which we had been silenced and a time at which we had been able to come to voice (Turner & Hudson, 2014, 4). He gave students time to journal or reflect silently before everyone had a chance to share out loud. This gave students of all learning styles a chance to process their own experiences, as related to the topic of the course, in multiple modes. In those first moments of the semester, incarcerated women who were a bit intimidated by Duke women and Duke women who were a bit intimidated by incarcerated women realized that many among them had been silenced by their churches in similar ways. They saw their own similarities while they learned to listen to each other's distinctive voices and defining life-moments. Preskill and Brooks write, "people listen closely and learn quickly when the topic touches their lives directly" (2009, 107). When the topic is God's work in the world, I believe that all students are directly impacted by the subject matter. Part of our job as theological educators is to make sure that experiential impact is welcomed explicitly into the sense-making process as something that facilitates theological learning rather than being treated as something that gets in the way of it.

4.2 | Narrative grading: Feedback that encourages life-long learners

When I began teaching Project TURN courses, I was aware of the programmatic injustice that our non-incarcerated students were receiving Duke course credit toward degrees, whereas our incarcerated students, who were doing the same work, were not receiving course credit. This called into question how assignments could be most helpfully assessed, and what the role of letter grades was for students who were not receiving credit. I wanted each student to emerge from the learning experience feeling affirmed in what she had done that semester and encouraged to keep going in her theological education. Sometimes, the promise of achieving a degree becomes a motivating factor that acts as a crutch for professors and students alike. We expect our students to keep learning in order to complete their degrees rather than taking the time to carefully spark within our students a keen interest and investment in their own education. In these situations, students can become tired and dispirited. Instead of pursuing classes out of a desire to learn, students plod forward, checking off courses toward an ultimate degree. Without the external impetus of the degree, Project TURN had to use other tactics to encourage learners to continue pursuing their theological education for the sake of the education itself. This is what prompted me to consider narrative grading.

Narrative grading is the process of writing a significant prose narrative for each student that comments on the strengths that the student has displayed throughout the semester and the areas of growth that can be addressed in future courses. Narrative grading can be combined with a letter grade when required by an institution, or it can stand alone as the primary form of feedback and assessment. Our narratives to individual students are typically one single-spaced, typed page. Faculty are quick to say that they have too many students to be able to provide such feedback (Bachelor, 1980, 12–14), and that was my initial impulse as well. But given the justice issue at stake in the credit disparity of our program, the negative learning histories of some of my students, and the diversity of the classroom, I pressed through my own sense of my time limitations and sat down at the end of that first semester to write letters to all of my students.

The response has been overwhelming. The first incarcerated woman who achieved Duke's "Certificate of Achievement in Theological Education" told me about half-way through her program that she kept taking classes "just for the letter at the end." Many students, incarcerated and non-incarcerated alike, have commented that the words in their letters are the kindest words that anyone has ever said to them. As we take the time to see the potential in students and to name that potential, we hear back that students had not imagined themselves to be preachers,

teachers, scholars, or ministers until we named those gifts within them in their narrative grades. Narrative grading reveals that assessment is not only about assessing what already is, the artifacts of classroom production and engagement. Grading can also be about assessing what might be, naming a student's potential and latent academic and ministerial gifting.

While I began this practice to honor my incarcerated students' effort and keep them enrolled, I have learned that all students flourish under this sort of encouragement. Throughout her years in the university setting, bell hooks has noticed that the majority of her students struggle with low self-esteem – students of all levels of intellectual ability. She writes that "teachers can promote healthy self-esteem in students by showing appropriate appreciation and awareness of their potential" (2010, 125). At a very basic level, students have to believe that they *can* learn in order to learn. While educators are more likely to recognize this need for affirmation in non-traditional students returning to the classroom (Hendrickson, Gable, & Manning, 1999), it is true of every human being who dares to learn.

4.3 | Ritual: Honoring the classroom experience

My favorite night of each academic semester is the last night of my prison class. We order pizza, and our DDS students bring in pre-approved, pre-sealed, clear plastic bottles of soda and store-bought desserts in clear plastic containers, abiding by regulations about what can and cannot enter the facility. The approval process and the clear plastic containers do not take away from how special it is to get to share a meal together or how infrequent it is to have the Hope Center filled with warm, rich smells. When the meal has begun to quiet, each person in the class shares something from her final project. Often, our final projects have invited some form of creative engagement with the content of the course, so the last night is filled with songs, poems, dances, essays, testimonies, and art work. In many ways, the last night can come to feel like worship.

I am always aware, on each last night, that my students will never be able to gather together again as a group. Class reunions are not an option. Students cannot use social media, campus activities, or even future classes to continue their web of connections. The last night of class must find a way to honor the relationships that have formed in this particular community of learning, offer a gracious way to close out many of those relationships, and name the possibilities (however limited and regulated) for future engagement moving forward. After we have honored our learning by sharing final projects, we take time for one closing circle. The format is open-ended. I name aloud that this is our last time to be together, and I open the floor for reflections on what the semester has meant – for any "last words." Somehow, every semester, I am still surprised at the vulnerability with which women speak aloud about their own prejudices, growth, and revised world-views. I see each last night, even if I have missed it for much of the semester, the passion and dedication that my students have brought to the classroom and the way in which the classroom has fueled that passion and dedication.

We end our circle with my instructions about how women can and cannot keep in touch. DDS students can begin correspondence with incarcerated students, and not the other way around. DDS students may not give out their addresses on that last night, and incarcerated students cannot write down their state-issued numbers to hand to their DDS friends; we must still abide by policies that prohibit the exchange of notes between residents and volunteers. I acknowledge that while it is awkward, if an incarcerated student really wants to maintain contact with a DDS student, now is the moment to tell her, so that she can pursue that relationship, if she so chooses, from the outside. And so, as chairs and tables are rearranged, pizza boxes thrown out, and books returned, women clump together, saying last words, and sometimes naming a desire for continued communication via letter.

Writing about the use of ritual in the classroom, Miriam Perkins explains, "rituals of worship, prayer, and liturgy are meant to help carry communities together through the vulnerabilities of life. Rituals can bring a sense of order, familiarity, and perspective to life" (2017, 351). Classrooms are inherently vulnerable spaces. Students bring themselves and their patterns of thinking and open themselves up for revisions, expansions, and transformations in their own thoughts. Prison classrooms highlight the vulnerability and inherent relationality of learning, but all classrooms

are vulnerable, relational sites. Ritual can help to honor the risk and ferocity that it takes to learn. While ritual might be used throughout the semester, I am particularly drawn to the use of ritual at the end of the semester. Perkins, (2017) writes, "rituals also serve to sustain communities through situations of abrupt change. They guide communities through 'liminality' (neither here nor there, but betwixt and between), and often can generate powerful moments of 'communitas' as connection and solidarity (Turner, 1969; Grimes, 2000)" (2017, 351). The ritual of a closing circle does not simply honor work that has already been done toward learning in community, but the circle itself is part of the semester's communal learning work. Sometimes, one does not fully know what one has learned until it is named aloud.

5 | CHALLENGING THE "WHAT" OF THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

When I set out to teach theological education in North Carolina's prisons, I was clear that our program would change the presumed "who" and "where" of the theological academy. Before setting foot in my first prison classroom, I had some ideas about how my pedagogical strategies – the "how" – might need to shift to accommodate a diverse community of learners. But I had no idea that over the course of a decade, my experience in prison classrooms would radically reshape the "what" of theology – my most basic theological truths themselves.

Looking back, the transformation started with questions. I began to wonder things like, "What does it mean that Jesus was arrested, jailed, criminalized, and shamed in a public trial process, and ultimately executed? What does this Jesus as a God-found-guilty, do to soteriologies that presume the innocence of the Lamb of God?" As I began to wrestle with the fullness of Jesus as an incarcerated person, I began to notice how the resurrection appearances resonate with the stories of my incarcerated students as they re-entered society after incarceration. Jesus' words to Peter in John 21:15–17 – *do you love me?* – came to resound with new meaning as I saw the savior of the world having to renegotiate his most intimate relationships after his friends abandoned him to his sentence, negotiations that my formerly incarcerated students were making, too.

Because teaching theology is not simply imparting beliefs but receiving and incorporating the theological sense-making of one's students into the wider systems of Christian thought, I also came to be intrigued with issues of theodicy and sovereignty in which my students' beliefs were quite different from my own. My students often made sense of their own incarcerations through claims about God's control over all things. Doing their time well meant trusting in God's purpose for their time in prison. As I heard this theological sense-making repeated over the years, I came to ask myself, "How do I permit this sense-making to shape my own notions of theodicy … and not write it off as something someone needs to tell herself to make it through the day?"

I was not the only one asking questions. I watched the Duke faculty coming into our program begin to ask questions too. A thoughtful teacher who sees her students being denied franchise rights, facing state execution and natural death in prison, or struggling to find basic work and housing after release will almost inevitably find herself asking what those life experiences – experiences of individual students but also, perforce, of the body of Christ – mean for Christian discipleship, call, and vocation, including the vocation of the theological educator. These questions cut to the heart of doctrinal beliefs, and they also affect our core Christian practices. As these questions are allowed to percolate into answers, engaging in prison teaching challenges the "what," the very content of theological education.

One of the first biblical stories that underwent radical re-imagining for me was the story of Jael in Judges 4–5. It took me about a year of regular presence in a women's prison to realize that every woman I had met who was in for murder had killed a partner who had been routinely beating her, sometimes for as long as a decade, sometimes coupled with rape, sometimes also coupled with violence against her children. These women were serving all sorts of sentences – some only seven years for manslaughter and others as much as life with parole. And I can still remember my initial feeling of shock and confusion that these situations were not considered self-defense.

As I began to learn more about self-defense law, I came to understand how and why battered women's patterns for fighting back do not, in many states, qualify as self-defense (Leonard, 2002). Understandably, battered women do not go up against men who have shown their ability to physically best them unarmed. Women typically fight back with use of a weapon. This use of a weapon often qualifies one as having used "excessive force," and the procurement of the weapon can sometimes be used as an indication of prior intent. Similarly, women trapped in abusive households often fight back when their partner is asleep or under the influence of drugs or alcohol, more points that place them squarely outside of what we consider legitimate self-defense. For years, I watched my students struggle with what it meant that they had taken a life. I read their spiritual autobiographies. I edited their essays. I became familiar with a pattern marked by deep guilt and deep regret coupled with the sad and tired truth that even looking back, they could not say what they could have done otherwise.

As a theological educator, biblical scholar, and pastor, I turn to Scripture to navigate these sorts of deep crises in identity and formation. In doing so, I found a woman who kills a man in just these sorts of ways in the Hebrew Bible. Jael, wife of Heber the Kennite, drives a tent peg through Sisera's skull while he sleeps. By some readings she gives him a sedative, offering milk when he asks for water and encouraging him to sleep (Judges 4:19, 5:25). She has motive, intent, and use of excessive force. Yet after she kills him, the Bible records a song of praise for Jael. Instead of convicting her for a crime or condemning her actions, the Scriptures sing her to be "most blessed of women" (Judges 5:24). The first time that I offered this reading of Scripture in one of our Project TURN classes, the room fell silent. Then, one of the students who was in for a related crime broke the silence with words barely above a whisper. She said, "Our world would be so much different if someone called us blessed."

Since that time, Jael has become a key figure in our community of learning. We have written songs, poems, papers, and spoken-word about Jael. After a few years of this sort of engagement with Judges 4–5, we offered a class entitled "Poetic Imagination." One night during that course, the professor read aloud a poem about a woman that used the line "most blessed of women." I immediately and excitedly thought of Jael, heroine of prison studies at NCCIW. We had a few excited minutes interpreting the poem in light of Jael, but I could read on the professor's face that something was amiss – this was not where she thought the conversation would go. The professor listened politely and when the conversation lulled she said, "So … someone else from the Bible is called most blessed of women." She looked at us with eyebrows raised and an inviting smile, making space for her students to respond. We looked at her blankly. She gave up on the silence and answered her own question: "Mary? You know, the Mother of God!"

Oh right, her.

That Jael, patron saint of women who kill men who would kill them (while asleep, with a weapon), could eclipse Mary Mother of God within the theological imagination of a Christian community is a radical reshaping of the "what" of theology.

Teaching in prison, I have the honor to watch this theological transformation happen over and over again. People's lives transform biblical interpretation and theological sense-making. Those new meanings get taken up in sermons, papers, liturgies, and Bible studies – all the modes of theological production – and those new creations then transform communal imagination. Changing who we educate, with care and purpose, to include incarcerated people initiates a snowball of challenges and transformations. The sites of theological education are re-centered to the margins of society. The methods of teaching are renegotiated as we are reminded that learning is a fierce and vulnerable relational task, and the very basic truths of our faith are re-visioned as the sense-making of all people is invited to shape the sense of who we know God to be.

REFERENCES

Alexander, M. (2010). *The new Jim Crow: Mass incarceration in the age of colorblindness*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Bachelor, D. L. (1980). Normative and mastery grading: Continuing the discussion. *Improving College and University Teaching*, *28*(3), 112–114.

Brookfield, S. D. (2006). 'Here I stand': Paul Robeson on adult education as cultural work, pan-Africanism and socialist persuasion. In *Proceedings of the 46th Adult Education Research Conference*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota.

Burlein, A. (2011). Learning to drink deeply from books: Using experiential assignments to teach concepts. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, *14*, 137–155.

Colson, D. (2013). Geographies of prejudice: Self-narration and radical teaching in the prison. *The Radical Teacher*, *95*, 51–56. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/radicalteacher.95.0051

Drucker, E. (2011). *A plague of prisons: The epidemiology of mass incarceration in America*. New York, NY: The New Press.

Erickson, V. L. (2002). Social theory, sacred text, and sing-sing prison: A sociology of community-based reconciliation. *Journal of Offender Rehabilitation*, *35*(3/4), 225–241.

Ginsberg, R. (2013). Using street smarts to build theoretical literacy: Teaching *The Wire* in prison. *Transformations: The Journal of Inclusive Scholarship and Pedagogy*, *24*(1–2), 169–175. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/trajincschped.24.1-2.0169

Grimes, R. L. (2000). *Deeply into the bone: Re-inventing rites of passage*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Hallett, M., Hays, J., Johnson, B., Jang, S. J., & Duwe, G. (2017). *The Angola prison seminary: Effects of faith-based ministry on identity transformation, resistance, and rehabilitation*. New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Heitzeg, N. A. (2009). Education or incarceration: Zero tolerance policies and the school to prison pipeline. *Forum on Public Policy Online*, *2*. Retrieved from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ870076.pdf

Hendrickson, J. M., Gable, R. A., & Manning, M. L. (1999). Can everyone make the grade? Some thoughts on student grading and contemporary classrooms. *The High School Journal*, *82*(4), 248–254.

hooks, b. (2010). *Teaching critical thinking: Practical wisdom*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Horton, A. (1989). *The Highlander folk school: A history of its major programs, 1932–1961*. New York, NY: Carlson.

Horton, M., & Freire, P. (1990). *We make the road by walking: Conversation on education and social change*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Jennings, W. (2014). The change we need: Race and ethnicity in theological education. *Theological Education*, *49*(1), 35–42. Retrieved from https://divinity.duke.edu/sites/divinity.duke.edu/files/documents/faculty/Race-and-Ethnicity-in-Theological%20Education.pdf

Jobe, S. (2012). Project TURN: Portrait of a ministry. *Christian Reflection: A Series in Faith and Ethics*, *42*, 74–78. Retrieved from https://www.baylor.edu/content/services/document.php/163071.pdf

Jobe, S. (2017). Educational models and practices in theological education: Programs in prison peer group final report. *Association of Theological Schools*, 1–7. Retrieved from https://www.ats.edu/resources/current-initiatives/educational-models-and-practices-theological-education

Kuhlmann, A. (2006). Prison dances: Teaching and learning behind bars. *Humanity & Society*, *30*(3), 237–253.

Leonard, E. D. (2002). *Convicted survivors: The imprisonment of battered women who kill*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Mauer, M., & King, R. S. (2007). Uneven justice: State rates of incarceration by race and ethnicity. *The Sentencing Project: Research and Advocacy for Reform*. Retrieved from http://prisonterminal.org/documents/rd_stateratesofincbyraceandethnicity.pdf

Parrotta, K. L., & Thompson, G. H. (2011). Sociology of the prison classroom: Marginalized identities and sociological imaginations behind bars. *Teaching Sociology*, *39*(2), 165–178. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/41308939

Perkins, M. Y. (2017). Greenscreen teaching: Institutional instability and classroom innovation. *Teaching Theology & Religion*, *20*, 343–355.

Preskill, S., & Brooks, S. (2009). *Learning as a way of leading: Lessons from the struggle for social justice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Scott, R. (2013). Distinguishing radical teaching from merely having intense experiences while teaching in prison. *The Radical Teacher*, *95*, 22–32. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/radicalteacher.95.0022

Solnit, R. (2009). *A paradise built in hell*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Turner, M. D., & Hudson, M. L. (2014). *Saved from Silence: Finding women's voice in preaching*. St. Louis, MO: Lucas Park Books.

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.

Western, B. & Pettit, B. (2010). On mass incarceration & social inequality. *Daedalus*, Summer. Retrieved from https://www.amacad.org/content/publications/pubContent.aspx?d=808

How to cite this article: Jobe SC. How programs in prisons are challenging the who, where, how, and what of theological education. *Teach Theol Relig*. 2019;22:16–29. https://doi.org/10.1111/teth.12466