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Universal Teaching in Carceral Spaces: Toward a Critical Prison Pedagogy

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Abstract
Drawing from first-hand experiences teaching political theory at two California, USA state prisons—Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) and Valley State Prison (VSP) — this paper offers an alternative pedagogical approach that frames students as equal participants in learning. It critiques hierarchical educational models such as the "banking method," which positions teachers as the primary source of knowledge and students as passive recipients. Instead, drawing from the work of French philosopher Jacques Rancière, this paper invites prison educators to adopt a pedagogical commitment to "universal teaching" that fosters an environment where students—treated as intellectual equals—engage critically with texts and ideas, connecting them to their own lived experiences within and against the carceral state. The paper proposes four key lessons in building a critical prison pedagogy. It encourages current and future educators to reassess their teaching practices to empower students to challenge the power structures that confine them.
Keywords: college-in-prison programs, universal teaching, intellectual emancipation, critical prison pedagogy
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1. Prologue

It was hot—one of those sweltering days in California's Central Valley that makes you question why anyone lives here, let alone how anything survives. On my nearly mile-long walk from the main security checkpoint of the Central California Women's Facility (CCWF), the largest women's correctional facility in the United States, to my un-air-conditioned classroom, the barren concrete landscape of fencing, towers, barbed wires, and housing yards served as a reminder of the harsh living conditions that students enrolled in prison educational programs face.[1]

The count at the yard gate was delayed; students were waiting to get in, and there was not enough staff to process the ducats promptly. I frantically kept tabs on my watch as precious minutes of class interaction were obliterated. For the past two years, I taught political theory at CCWF and the neighboring men's facility, Valley State Prison (VSP), as part of a college-in-prison program.[2] Any delay in getting the students from their housing units, the "chow hall," or work placement came at the expense of our class time. Seventy-five minutes, no more, and all too frequently less.

As I impatiently waited to greet the students, I wondered whether my prepared remarks on the philosophical contours of Platonic thought would make sense in a drastically shortened class. What could I eliminate without compromising the integrity of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave"? How, in a truncated session, without modern classroom technologies other than a chalkboard, and in uncomfortable weather conditions, could a text written over two millennia ago be relevant, engaging, and meaningful to incarcerated students in the 21st century?

The count finally cleared, leaving a dozen sweaty students and one outrageously perspiring instructor ready to start class. With less than 40 minutes remaining, I made a swift decision that would forever change my pedagogical approach: I abandoned my prepared notes and instead asked, "Do you live in a cave?"

My question was not designed to teach the students anything. It was not meant to covertly determine whether they read the assigned text. The question also did not presume expertise on my behalf or imply that a correct answer was expected. Instead, the seemingly odd question was an open-ended invitation for students to share their interpretation of the text and its relevance to their lived experiences.

[1] Prison education is a broad term for educational modalities that serve incarcerated students, including vocational and technical training, GED preparation and examination, literacy skills, citizenship testing, and English language skills. In this paper, the term refers to college classes and programs embedded in correctional facilities through partnerships with regional community colleges, liberal arts colleges, or research universities.

[2] In the sprawling California prison system, CCWF is classified as a Level II, medium-security institution, whereas VSP is a Level III, high-security institution. Less than half a mile apart, both facilities were opened in the small agricultural town of Chowchilla during the prison boom of the 1990s.

The responses to this nonhierarchical inquiry were nothing short of exceptional. Freed from the banking method of knowledge transfer standard in institutionalized educational settings, the students began to think independently, critically, and introspectively. They recognized that what was to follow would not be a strict explication of the text from professor to docile students.

The students articulated countless *encounters* and *experiences* of powerlessness. They shared recollections of moments when they had desired to be seen and heard, afforded equality, only to be denied dignity, care, and compassion. The particularities shared by the students, affirming their sense of entrapment in cave-like environments—systems of near-total intellectual and bodily control by external forces—were far-reaching, intimate, and personal. Plato's idea of a cave inhabited by chained dwellers, divorced from reality, transcended the discursive power of the text. For the students, the cave represented the foster care system, heteronormativity, patriarchy, corporate media, schools, the military, and, most importantly, "this place," referring to the prison.

These students situated concurrently within the historically exclusionary institution of higher education and the repressive institution of the carceral state (Karpowitz, 2017, pp. 159–161)—or, as one student keenly proposed, "a cave within a cave"—obliterated the architecture of standardized education reliant upon an artificial distribution of power between teacher and students. Instead, our open-ended exploration into and out of the cave verified that learning is possible without explication among a community of equals.

This demonstration of intellectual emancipation is not an anomaly in a prison classroom; it is often the norm. Students enrolled in college-in-prison programs confirm the transformative potential of what Rancière (1987/1991) refers to as "universal teaching." Rancière refines this concept, stressing that everyone can think and learn, whatever their background or educational training. Universality speaks to the idea that learning occurs outside the formal hierarchical structure that views the professor as the idealized embodiment of knowledge.

Rancière's (1987/1991) critique of traditional pedagogies finds commonality with other prominent thinkers advocating for a more democratic, pluralistic, and experimental basis of learning, such as Dewey (1916/1944), Freire (1970/2000), and Freinet (1949/1993). The notion of universal teaching also complements critiques by decolonial scholars against rigid, dominant Western notions of linguistic, cultural, and intellectual knowledge. Decolonial pedagogies decenter entrenched Eurocentric institutions of knowledge production, calling instead for a pedagogy of and for emancipation (Anzaldúa, 1987; Wynter, 2003; Simpson, 2017; Mignolo, 2011).

The turn to decolonial thinkers such as Anzaldúa and Wynter further underscores the necessity of reimagining the classroom as a site of shared becoming, belonging, and inquiry. Anzaldúa's *mestiza consciousness* speaks directly to the multiplicities of the self, the often-contradictory identities that all students, including those incarcerated, inhabit. To teach from a space of difference, multiplicity, and the fluidity of self-collective constitution is to acknowledge the borderlands within the classroom: the psychic, political, and epistemic tensions that mark each student's experience (1987, p. 80). Similarly, Wynter's critique of the overrepresentation of "Man" in dominant educational models affirms the need to deconstruct who has dominantly historically been perceived as a knowing subject (2003, p. 259). A pedagogy committed to universal teaching must traverse the liminal space of the classroom for these potential ruptures where new subjectivities, knowledges, and communities can emerge.

These alternative pedagogies, from universal teaching to critical pedagogy to a *mestiza* consciousness, confront the epistemological and methodological foundations of traditional education models. They offer valuable perspectives for developing a prison pedagogy that rejects a skills-based acquisition model geared toward potential economic return and the continuation of practices that "teach" a student to remain incarcerated—juridically, physically, emotionally, and intellectually. Instead, prison educational programs must challenge the imposed powerlessness of learners inherent in archaic pedagogies by situating equality and emancipation at their foundation.

To support ongoing critical prison pedagogies that *imagine* and *employ* strategies to dismantle the carceral state (Davis, 2003, 2005; Rodríguez, 2006; Meiners & Winn, 2012), I offer four holistic lessons from my experiences as an educator within carceral institutions. The lessons focus on pedagogical *commitments* rather than structural or programmatic avenues for organized political–ethical action. Teaching is inherently a political–ethical commitment, yet the primary concern here is how a critical pedagogical approach can augment the "long march through the institutions" of higher education and the criminal legal system in the struggles for liberation (Marcuse, 1972, p. 55).[1] Although there is a tendency to perceive teaching practices as another iteration of neoliberal "best practices" designed to propagate the marketization of social life, my lessons eschew an animating principle that reduces all life forms to quantifiable economic metrics. Instead, these preliminary

[1] I use the term 'criminal legal system' to differentiate it from a system that delivers justice. Referring to policing, law enforcement, corrections, and legal proceedings in the United States as part of a 'justice system' carries both analytical implications and practical consequences. It obscures the reality that these institutions often fail to render justice.

lessons aim to support current and future practitioners of prison education in understanding how traditional pedagogical practices may stifle intellectual curiosity, maturation, and emancipation.

2. Lesson i: Stay Grounded

Feminist scholarship has long placed "the personal" as a source for envisioning and realizing liberation, practices of care, and projects of communal nourishment. Articulations of identities, embodied experiences, and desires forge a humanistic, holistic understanding of the self. Our identities are dynamic and fluid, shaped by our experiences (Collins, 2000, 2019; hooks, 2000). This crucially circles experiences of exclusion and violence, joy, memory, and compassion *inter alia*. Such emphasis on the personal recognizes an ethic of shared humanity and the complexities and contingencies of social identity formations.

In a pedagogical context, particularly within a carceral institution, educators are expected to divorce the self from their teaching role. Correctional departments maintain strict policies against the disclosure of personal or sensitive information. These policies help ensure a safe and healthy environment for students and instructors. However, the emphasis placed on these safeguards by nonteaching prison personnel is most telling. Correctional officers and other administrators frequently remind educators to refrain from revealing anything personal inside the classroom. This exacerbates hierarchies of power and privilege between educators and students, manifesting in practices such as withholding the instructor's first name, identifying students by prison identification numbers rather than their preferred names, and never disclosing anything about oneself to the students.

Although there are valid reasons for maintaining healthy boundaries, I propose an alternative approach: stay grounded by fostering mutual respect, personal authenticity, and vulnerability. This means eschewing the facade of the discipline expert as the ultimate and only source of knowledge, and replacing it with vulnerability and honesty. This can include learning student names, sharing your educational journey, and connecting course material to your experiences. By not expecting that we leave all the unique, multilayered vicissitudes of our identity at the gate and enter the classroom as both an empty receptacle of personhood and the paradigmatic source of pure knowledge, educators implicitly yet productively challenge traditional hierarchical forms of learning. Be who you are, not what the institutionalized expectation of your role demands. Do not be afraid to convey confusion over course material, tell a joke, laugh (occasionally at yourself), ask questions, and share experiences. Reveal to students what is frequently absent inside a classroom: the personal.

A commitment to this pedagogical approach undoubtedly requires a significant reorientation in how educators typically engage with students. It is deeply rooted in an ethos of care and the transformative power of education. However, it also brings with it the potential for emotional labor exhaustion. Being mindful of which educators' identities already bear a disproportionate amount of emotional labor outside of the classroom poses potential challenges, such as teaching burnout and inequitable divisions of labor among educators.

It's essential to recognize that an educator's unique positionality and intersecting identities may already be socially constructed to influence their acceptance or rejection by the student population. The ability to present oneself authentically and genuinely in the classroom confronts pre-existing norms regarding who is viewed as a legitimate or accepted educator. This challenge is particularly pronounced in carceral spaces, where students' histories of disciplinary educational practices and systemic inequities often reinforce preconceptions about authority and social roles.

An invitation for educators to engage authentically does not imply a uniform commitment for all. Such engagement must be nurtured through a foundation of trust and care, fostering community without subjecting the educator to personal harm.

3. Lesson ii: Surrender the Role of Expert

Traditional pedagogy in primary and secondary schools, as well as in postsecondary fields, typically relies on explication. This implies that the teacher represents a comprehensive repository of technical, intellectual, communicative, and pedagogical knowledge. It is the teacher, the subject expert, who establishes the basis for learning, transferring to the students pertinent information on the topic at hand. The verticality of this arrangement positions the teacher as the pinnacle of knowledge, endowed with the requisites to assess student proficiency. A hierarchical imbalance thus places the teacher at a power advantage, resulting in a classroom of unequals.

Even the Socratic method, a dialectical dialogue between interlocutors, cannot escape this power imbalance. It was Socrates's intense questioning that prompted his fellow Athenians to reevaluate their beliefs. Although Socratic interrogation can facilitate learning through a meticulously constructed explanation, it does not necessarily lead to intellectual emancipation, as it is based on a framework of inequality. Pedagogical approaches like the traditional banking or Socratic method amplify and reinforce a hierarchical dynamic between teachers and students. Embedded within these methods are binary evaluative criteria: superior versus inferior, speaker versus listener, authority versus subordinate, and achievement versus deficiency.

Beyond the punitive effects of social control, the symbolic value of the prison lies in constructing an image of absolute powerlessness. Confronting this reality, prison educators must reckon with the critical question at the heart of a transformative, justice-based pedagogy: Is authentic learning possible when students are unequal inside and outside of the classroom/inside and outside of prison?

To address this question, I propose a second (controversial) lesson for prison educators: recognizing that a pedagogical method alone is insufficient for learning. By subscribing to the idea of educators as sole experts of any discipline charged with shaping the learning environment, we fall prey to the same logic underscoring the explicative system. Maintaining that knowledge can be transferred exclusively through a one-dimensional, vertical exchange between instructor and student presupposes a classroom of unequals. In this light, students engaged in prison educational programs must attempt to learn within a system that mirrors the punitive sociopolitical order.

Objections will point to requiring assessment metrics and curriculum competencies to sustain educational programs contingent upon state and federal funding. Yet, such a proposition evades the main thrust of this unconventional thinking. Students engage with, study, and memorize material presented in the classroom, often demonstrating their proficiency through exams, quizzes, and papers. These assessment data points fail to confirm authentic learning but rather indicate a student's ability to transfer back to the instructor that which was previously transmitted.

There is a material, transformative upshot when an educator acknowledges that learning is only possible when a student is treated as an equal, intelligent, thinking person. In Rancière's view, this belief holds revolutionary potential, for it confirms that we all—from childhood to adulthood—learn without explication. Universal teaching threatens traditional pedagogical norms by positing that "one must learn something and relate everything else to it" (Rancière, 1987/1991, p. 20). Learning shifts from retaining and quantitatively translating facts/theories/concepts to a capacity to relate fragments of knowledge within a framework understood by the learner. Put differently, learners do not need to possess a totality of knowledge on a subject to learn, rendering the idea of a teacher as the singular expert obsolete. Instead, teachers should empower students to engage in self-navigated learning through "critically conscious study [. . .] that is collective, collaborative, and nonhierarchical" (McDowell & Reed, 2018, p. 158).

While my efforts here are to foreground Rancière's notion of universal teaching for the ongoing development of a critical prison pedagogy, I also want to situate this approach alongside Paulo Freire's model of critical pedagogy. Centrally, both thinkers reject traditional, hierarchical education structures, particularly the idea that knowledge must be transferred from an expert teacher to passive students. Yet there lies a significant distinction between these approaches. Freire's "problem-posing" method encourages dialogical encounters between teachers and students as co-investigators, committed to unveiling the structures of oppression through praxis (Freire 2000, p. 61). In contrast, Rancière goes further by collapsing the hierarchy entirely: for him, *intellectual equality is the starting point*, not the end goal. While Freire emphasizes *conscientização*—developing critical consciousness through reflection and action—Rancière challenges even the need for explanation itself, insisting that learning precedes teaching. Thus, Universal teaching rejects banking-style education and any pedagogy that relies on the teacher as an authoritative guide or interpreter. In this way, Rancière destabilizes the very foundations of teacher authority and proposes a more radical model of emancipation.

This means inviting students to encounter a text independently without any preliminary discursive parameters. For example, in my political theory seminar at CCWF and VSP, students grapple with complex philosophical works by Foucault (1977), Baudrillard (1981/1994), and Said (1978), among others. For each text, I encourage students to stay within the text by reading it without using secondary sources or background information. In class, students pose questions about the text to one another, offer personal and nuanced connections, and explore the relationship between theory and application. The text serves as a shared space where learners with diverse backgrounds and life experiences can engage and converse as equals.

The fluid, multidirectional character of student-led discussions also allows students to craft the direction of the class. In a collaborative learning environment, empowered students can frame a text on political and cultural events, both historically and contemporarily. For example, exploring Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), my students assessed the continued territorial, economic, and psychological impacts of (neo)colonialism, prompting some to consider the merits of reparation programs, including the Oakland City Council Report on Redlined Neighborhoods (City of Oakland, 2022). Students requested that the subsequent class be structured as a debate between opposing perspectives on the issue of reparations for Black communities in Oakland. The following class was miraculous: a demonstration of persuasive articulation, civility, intelligence, and compassion. The debate was a qualitative illustration of students actively listening, thinking, responding, and, most importantly, learning from one another. This was not a pedagogical anomaly; rather, it has the potential to

become the norm if educators relinquish the role of expert and empower students to engage in their learning successfully.

Students enrolled in my classes have often voiced transformative reactions to this pedagogical approach. Upon viewing a series of images that highlight the commonalities between prison and school architecture and geography—fences, surveillance cameras, directional arrows, cement blocks—students remarked that these structures provoke feelings of "claustrophobia," or that they exuded "discipline" and "control." These student responses emerged not from traditional assessment metrics but from genuine encounters with course material and lived experiences that prompted personal insight and critical reflection. These responses align with findings from longitudinal studies of college-in-prison programs. For example, a wave of recent studies documents not only reduced recidivism but also increased civic engagement, emotional growth, and political awareness among incarcerated students (Conway, 2023; Delaney, Patrick, & Boldin, 2019; Erzen, Gould, & Lewen, 2019). Such data support the claim that intellectual transformation does not require hierarchical instruction but arises through authentic participation, openness, and intellectual equality.

4. Lesson iii: Explore Inside/Outside

Established in 2014, the Rising Scholars Network, in partnership with the California Community College system, is "committed to using higher education as a tool to combat the impacts of mass incarceration" (California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office, n.d.). The students I work with are enrolled in courses offered through Merced College, a midsized community college in California's Central Valley. They earn credits for an Associate in Arts for Transfer (AA-T) degree by satisfying general education requirements and program-specific courses. For students earning an AA-T while at CCWF and VSP, continuing with their educational goals is made possible via the California State University's dedicated track for a BA in social science (Fresno State, n.d.).

For many students, a college education was inconceivable on the outside. It is jarring to hear a student say it took them "being convicted of a felony to finally make it to college." The somber reality of this statement reflects the insidious scope of the cradle-to-prison pipeline and the societal inequities—along racial, ethnic, linguistic, gender, and class lines—that have long plagued access to higher education in the United States. It may seem evident, but incarcerated students desire a robust analysis to understand better the commonalities between the prison and institutions beyond the walls. An open classroom of inquiry and equality can draw out, challenge, and grapple with the ubiquitous technologies of control that are historically woven into the operational processes and discourses of the prison, school, and workplace, especially in the "struggles of the racialized and gendered experiences of students" (Sharma, 2012, p. 73).

To engage the insatiable curiosity of the students to discuss happenings outside the myopic confines of the prison, I propose a third lesson: explore the complexities, intricacies, and facets of life inside and outside the prison. Benchmark time, even if only five minutes, at the beginning or end of each class for students to engage in small talk. Getting to the classroom is not easy for students. Many wake up hours before sunrise for their work placement; others participate in therapeutic and rehabilitative groups, meaning that by the time they reach their late afternoon or evening class, they are exhausted. Encourage students to acknowledge that when they enter the classroom, the physical doorframe serves as a portal into a place once assumed unattainable or even unimaginable: a college classroom.

In those early, precious moments of class, I distribute engaging newspaper articles, seemingly random surveys about movies, music, or food, or even updated standings for popular sports leagues. The openness of our class prologue encourages students to get to know one another differently, removed from the yard or housing units. It also provides a much-needed respite for humanity; they are no longer embodiments of their accused crime, just a number—they are living, thinking people with interests, passions, and curiosities. The result is that students ask questions, tell stories, and recommend groups or readings that their classmates should explore. They also envision strategies to dismantle the prison-industry complex from an inside-outside perspective, pointing to the necessity of trans-institutional resistance coalitions (Ricordeau, 2023, pp. 107–108).

Students additionally engage in constructive discourse on major national and world events. Over the past few years, students have robustly discussed topics such as the wars in Ukraine and Gaza, rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court, climate change, immigration, the death penalty, police reform, the removal of Confederate statues, elections, health care, and voting rights for incarcerated persons. Although social science or humanities courses may be more conducive than science, technology, engineering, and mathematics offerings to develop links between the open forum practice and course content, there remains an inherent pedagogical value in cultivating authentic reciprocity between all classroom members.

Supporting a malleable approach to in-class time management helps navigate the uncertainties of teaching in carceral spaces. No two sessions are the same because of occurrences that could shorten or cancel a class. Institutional disturbances—from lockdowns to illness-related quarantines of students to the impact of

severe weather conditions—are standard features of prison education. Having an agenda for class is the bare minimum; developing a second, third, and fourth contingency plan is ideal.

Flexibility within the class is essential because interruptions are frequent. Roster and head counts by correctional officers, unannounced room searches, and yard-triggered alarms can fracture the rhythm and continuity of in-class learning. These interruptions can be counterproductive. I encourage prison educators to use these disruptive episodes to check in with students, assess how they are feeling/thinking about the material, or share a tangentially related topic to ease transitions back to active learning. Treating interruptions as personal interventions is necessary to recenter learning, dialogue, and inquiry against the omnipresent practices of disciplinary power. In so doing, educators demonstrate a commitment to questioning inside and outside, approaching these dichotomous spaces of punishment and freedom not as distinct social domains but as interrelated, contingent social constructs.

The pedagogical aim here is to rupture the presumed binary between inside and outside—the binaristic framing of freedom versus repression—and to cultivate the conditions for what Freire calls critical consciousness: the ability to perceive the social, political, and economic contradictions of one's world and to act against its oppressive elements. By flattening the hierarchy of knowledge within the classroom, students begin a process of *unlearning* dominant, entrenched assumptions, categories, and concepts. In particular, starting from a premise of equality disrupts the Western, universalizing notion of who can produce knowledge and who is deemed a viable recipient of enlightenment. This inversion reimagines how knowledge is articulated, shared, and enacted, not merely produced and reified. In exploring the boundary between inside and outside, we return to Anzaldúa's notion of the *borderlands*: the convergence of two seemingly distinct realms, each structured by particular norms and practices. The task is not to overcome these divisions but to embrace the intimacy of difference through an ethical reciprocity of self-disclosure. It is in the spaces between institutions and the gaps between students that self and collective discovery emerge, formed in the shifting, amorphous, violent, yet promising terrain of the borderlands.

5. Lesson iv: An Unwavering Belief

Policymakers in states like California and New York emphasize the benefits of prison education programs, justifying the allocation of taxpayer dollars to support multifaceted rehabilitation efforts. Most notably, higher education opportunities for incarcerated persons significantly reduce recidivism by 43% (Davis et al., 2013, p. 32). Data also support the positive effects of prison education on employment opportunities after release, particularly for students earning a BA degree (Bard Prison Initiative, n.d.).

Although data on the impacts of college-in-prison programs show overwhelmingly positive results for economic benefits, employment outcomes, and reduced recidivism, funding and expanding these initiatives prompts a reassessment of societal values on human dignity: "Access to education for incarcerated people is one factor that can contribute to redefining how we as a society reimagine the purpose of prison to be potentially transformative" (Gellman, 2022, p. 192).

Teaching behind bars is a tangible sign of a passion for education, an ethic of love for those at the violent, exclusionary margins of our society, and a resolute belief that intellectual emancipation is possible for all. The fourth and final lesson I offer is this: believe that personal, collective, and societal transformation is possible—because it is. Those active within prison education circles will attest that teaching in carceral spaces is a Sisyphean endeavor, with pervasive and amorphous administrative, logistical, curricular, technological, and institutional challenges.

But it is worth it. Behind classroom walls, there is living, breathing, incarnate poetry of human life: moments of undefined beauty and joy, recollections of impossible sorrow and pain, offerings of spiritual and emotional care, and suspensions of powerlessness, through the intercession of intellectual emancipation. Countless students have shared with me their motivation to learn, with dreams of serving as teachers, lawyers, prison abolitionists, and social workers. The community leaders of tomorrow are today interrogating the multitude of caves that ensnare us all, contesting their limits to develop pathways for liberation and societal change.

6. Epilogue

Implementing a pedagogy of universal teaching inside carceral spaces is certainly not without difficulty. Educators regularly encounter institutional constraints, from the rigidity of correctional policy to the skepticism of non-teaching staff, that undermine efforts to cultivate openness and equality. There are also the enduring challenges that students bring with them: inconsistent educational backgrounds, histories of exclusion, and the emotional, physical, and spiritual toll of incarceration. These barriers can complicate the belief that all students begin as intellectual equals. In addition, the state-funded nature of many college-in-prison programs often requires instructors to adhere to standardized assessments and content delivery models that re-inscribe hierarchy.

These tensions are not reasons to abandon the project of critical prison pedagogy but rather reminders that teaching in such settings demands adaptability, patience, and an honest reckoning with contradiction. The goal is not perfection, but persistence—finding space for intellectual emancipation even in the narrow confines of a college classroom inside a prison.

The lessons outlined in this paper are not offered as a prescriptive model or a checklist of best practices. Instead, they are intended as starting points—*openings*—for educators committed to rethinking their role in spaces of institutional confinement. Still, there are small, intentional moves that can help animate a pedagogy of universal teaching. Begin class with a question that resists easy answers and invites reflection. Share your own learning process, not to center yourself, but to model the vulnerability that traditional classrooms often suppress. Allow students to shape the direction of discussion, especially when they draw connections between theory and lived experience. Build in space for detours—through humor, memory, or current events—that affirm the classroom as a human space, not a bureaucratic, disciplining one.

In practice, these commitments don't require elaborate restructuring—just a willingness to let go of control and lean into shared authorship. Start class with a question that opens something up: *Where do you see this in your own life? What systems make this possible or impossible? What does this text assume about freedom or power?* Let students bring in texts or examples that matter to them. Be open to adjusting the syllabus as new themes emerge. These small moves—co-creating the space, centering student insight, treating interpretation as a collective process—can shift the classroom from a place of instruction to a site of possibility.

Incarcerated students often approach the classroom with justified skepticism. The educator may be seen not as a liberatory figure but as an extension of the very institutional power they critique. Building trust, then, is not a matter of performance, but of presence, humility, and honesty. Universal teaching practices do not guarantee emancipation. But they can refuse dominant models of hierarchical instruction, opening pathways for students to engage critically, collectively, and on their own terms.

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