

Implementing Feminist Attitudes in the Inspired Minds Classroom to Help Reduce Recidivism

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Abstract

Implementing feminist attitudes in the Inspired Minds classroom—or any classroom for that matter—creates a contested space for active learning where students are comfortable in expressing their ideas and emotions through discussions and writing assignments. Although data regarding recidivism rates are a work in progress in Canada, educational programs like Inspired Minds help participants experience self-expression, which may lead to positive outcomes as contributing members of society. Sharing this learning experience with the participants of Inspired Minds allows everyone involved in the process to partake in an educational journey and demonstrates to the inmates that anyone, regardless of writing experience, can benefit from creative writing.

Keywords: feminism, correctional center classroom, Inspired Minds, implementing feminist attitudes, scriptotherapy, recidivism

I chose to work outside of my comfort zone by picking the Saskatoon Correctional Center (SCC), a men's provincial facility, for my internship. Until this project, I had never been to a correctional center nor has it ever crossed my mind that I would facilitate a class in one. As it turns out, after my last Inspired Minds: All Nations Creative Writing Program session, I enjoyed my time facilitating a class in a correctional center. Inspired Minds is a creative writing program at the SCC supervised by Diann Block, SCC First Nations and Métis Cultural Coordinator. Inspired Minds has an annual collection of published works and artworks called *Creative Escape: Inmate Stories and Art* by SCC inmates—regardless if they participated in the program or not. The program started in 2011 in the SCC chapel as a writing workshop, “organized by

Dr. Kathleen James-Cavan and Honours English student Dorian Geiger in partnership with Diann Block” (qtd. in Piche 15), partnered with a large group of inmates interested in the program. The men also chose that the program be named Inspired Minds. In this paper, I address how feminist attitudes are implemented in the Inspired Minds classroom, a pedagogy that has been in place since 2011. I further mention toxic masculinity in this paper because violence is a known problem, not only in the SCC, but also in other correctional centers. Because there is no current data on recidivism rates in connection to the program, I will be arguing that scriptotherapy and educational programs like Inspired Minds *can* help reduce recidivism. Using Shoshanna Pollack and Jessica Hutchinson's pedagogy of

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“transform[ing] perceptions about those perceived to be ‘other,’” Inspired Minds participants will be referred to as students/participants, rather than inmates (10). Furthermore, the name of a former Inspired Minds participant, Shane Gamble, that I mention in this paper has been previously published online—in newspapers, blogs, news—and in print, specifically in the SCC’s small publication called *Creative Escape: Inmate Stories and Art*. The contents of this paper—Shane Gamble’s name, the statements, experiences, and comments—have been further assessed and approved by my internship supervisor, Diann Block, SCC First Nations and Métis Cultural Coordinator. My internship partner, Mariana Guevara, and Diann Block have both approved to have their names mentioned in this paper. This paper discusses my personal experience with the Inspired Minds program in the SCC in conversation with scholarly research to argue the importance and the impact of educational programs in prison within the participants and community members involved. By implementing feminist attitudes in a correctional center classroom, one provides and creates a contested and non-toxic space for learning, which in turn enables students to express ideas freely and listen actively. Further, educational programming in correctional centers, such as Inspired Minds, not only reduces violent behaviours but also helps in providing a start in reducing recidivism and/or reoffending rates.

Terms and Definitions Used in the Paper

Contested Space:

In “From Safe Space to Contested Space in the Feminist Classroom,” Jeannie Ludlow defines “contested space” as “a space that is not necessarily defined by conflict, but which includes room for conflict ... to testify together” (47). In the Inspired Minds classroom, the students learned actively through debate activities and through understanding how to take and give constructive criticism from and to others. Most importantly, students learn how to allow “for a positive sharing experience wherein the participant has control of their narrative” (Piche 64).

Feminism:

In *Feminism is for Everyone*, hooks states that “feminism” is “a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (viii). In this paper, I will expand this definition by arguing that feminism means social equality for all sexes and giving agency to marginalized voices which, in the case of this paper, are the voices of the participants of Inspired Minds. The program’s feminist pedagogy, implemented since 2011, asserts the importance of listening and respecting others’ opinions.

Scriptotherapy:

Suzette Henke coined the term “scriptotherapy” in *Shattered Subjects*. In *Haunted Narratives*, Gabriele Rippl et. al. contribute to the definition by stating that “in oral as well as written attempts at verbalization, trauma and memory are closely connected with storytelling” (10) and, I argue, reflective writing. In *The Truth About Stories*, Thomas King states that stories are medicine. Because the majority of the participants in Inspired Minds are Indigenous, oral storytelling and reflective writing can have the power to cure, but also trigger. Scriptotherapy is in-line with creating a contested space because it is important “to provide a space where this storytelling can be done in a constructive way” (Piche 64).

Toxic Masculinity:

The term “toxic masculinity” has a negative connotation because of its definition in the past as a word that denotes using violence and “force in order to feel, and be seen as, dominant and in control” because of the insecurity men feel when they cannot reach society’s “unattainable standards” (Salter par. 6). In “Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health Treatment in Prison,” Terry Kupers also defines “toxic masculinity” as “the constellation of socially regressive male traits that serve to foster domination, the devaluation of women, homophobia, and wanton violence” (714). In a YouTube video called *Feminism in Prison*, former inmate Richard Edmond Vargas states that through “toxic masculinity, you become a real man by doing these three things: athletic skills (by dominating in that sense), by objectifying women, and by having money ... it really comes down to violence” (qtd. in Gayles and Lacey-Bordeaux 1:03-1:19).

Overview – My Experience with Inspired Minds: All Nations Creative Writing Program

In December 2019, I received the opportunity to intern with the Inspired Minds program in the SCC, alongside Mariana, under the guidance of Diann Block. This opportunity was provided through an English course called Career Internship, a privilege for senior English honours students. Every year, since 2010, Diann Block has gathered submissions—artworks, poetry, prose, short stories—from Inspired Minds participants and from any inmate in the SCC for *Creative Escape: Inmate Stories and Art*, a small and humble publication.

Because my internship at the SCC did not start until the second semester, my first Inspired Minds session began in January of 2020. Mariana and I would meet with the group once a week for two-hour sessions in the Charlie unit (C-unit) over a period of eight weeks. Throughout the week, we

would plan a “syllabus” for the next session. Every session, students were taught various genres and topics of literature according to their interests. We would match the genres they were most interested in with the topics that they also wanted to discuss. For example, poetry was paired with the topic of cooking; autobiography was paired with lifestyle; debate was paired with the topic of addiction. In addition, my intern partner and I would assign work for ourselves—I constructed handouts and she created the homework. The handouts contained an inspiring quote for the day—one that corresponded to the lesson for that day—basic literary terms and definitions, writing exercises, and writing assignments.

Implementing Feminist Attitudes in a Classroom

When feminist attitudes are implemented in a diverse classroom, there is a possibility that students are willing to participate in class discussions. Further, students can find the classroom environment comfortable and contested, especially discussions that have sensitive topics—such as autobiography, debate, music, war etc. Implementing feminist attitudes in a diverse classroom can eliminate toxic masculinity, create a comfortable environment for students to express freely without judgement, and reduce violent behaviours.

There are five steps the program uses to implement feminist attitudes in the Inspired Minds classroom. The first step is to create guidelines for the classroom, such as treating others with respect, and maintaining that value by keeping discussions that occur in the classroom *in* the classroom. On the first day of Inspired Minds, Diann handed out guidelines that she created for the students and facilitators to remember and follow. The guideline states, for instance, that respect should be given to everyone in the classroom, offensive words are not to be expressed, personal stories that are shared by students should be undisclosed outside of the classroom, and reasons why or how one got convicted/incarcerated should not be disclosed in the classroom. Respecting other’s emotions is an important part of eliminating toxic masculinity in the classroom. Some students are very vulnerable and emotional when they share, so it is important that others respect that emotion and avoid perceiving it as a form of weakness. In the Inspired Minds classroom, the students have shown respect towards their peers and to us, Diann and the facilitators.

The second step is to recognize power structures and/or dynamics. Although Mariana and I are people of colour, we definitely consider ourselves as white-passing—we are “accepted” by the dominant white culture as “white” because of our skin and privilege. In addition, we are students acquiring university education. Compared to the participants, we are facilitators of the class. Neither of us had

ever been in jail before until we got the placement, nor did we have criminal records. In terms of race, my ethnicity may be very different from the students’ and my intern partner but the Inspired Minds students, myself, and Mariana, are still considered as a minority group in Canada. Furthermore, privilege can be seen through Mariana’s and my occupations, and this includes our supervisor Diann as well. So, in order for us to facilitate an active learning space that strengthens equality in the classroom, we—the facilitators—need to recognize our own power and privilege. By doing so, we reflect on our privilege and figure out how we can distribute power in the classroom. This is when we start to create inclusive activities, and by this, I mean, activities that we can all do together; when they share, we also share.

This is when the third step comes in—creating a contested space in the classroom—and it is to ensure that all voices get the chance to speak and be heard; this is practiced through our debate activities where participants are in control of their narrative and are able to express frustrations on issues in a meaningful manner. In *Inspired Minds: An Exploration of a Creative Writing Classroom at Saskatoon Correctional Centre*, Allison Piche argues that creative writing programs “provide constructive environments wherein participants’ work ‘is evaluated from an artistic point of view only, not in terms of their psyches’” (20). I agree with Piche’s statement wherein the interns encourage the students to write whatever creative idea comes to mind and not worry about how sophisticated or good their writing sounds. This is why we wrote L’Amour’s quote on the board that says, “Start writing, no matter what. The water does not flow until the faucet is turned on” (qtd. in Wenstrom par. 10). Piche further maintains that the benefits of creative writing and educational programming “extend beyond transmission of knowledge from instructor to participant” (9). Inspired Minds and other educational programs can transform hegemonically masculine classrooms in a men’s correctional facility by creating a contested space where students become active learners.

Through debate activities, we were able to encourage the students to look at some things with a different perspective, which is the fourth step. Fortunately, the students have voted—active learning at play—to discuss debate. As I have mentioned in my overview, the genre of debate is paired with the topic of addiction. Keep in mind that the students pick the genres and the topics they are most interested in. In class, we decided to debate about the legalization of drugs. For this activity, we gave both of the teams—me in one team and Mariana in the other—a chance to voice their own arguments on both perspectives: whether drugs should be legal or not. To make things interesting, the participants chose a representative for their team to pick one piece of paper from an envelope that contained proper nouns—priest, pregnant woman, correctional officer, teacher, inmate, grandma, teenager, mother, and father.

Then, the team representative has to argue, as the voice of the pronoun they picked, what the pros and cons are for the legalization of drugs. The students enjoyed this activity because they were able to voice both perspectives of whether drugs should or should not be legal *and* voice other people's perspectives as well. This is called "transformative learning" in which "individuals foster their own critical lens with which to understand (and also question) the world, rather than relying on the interpretations of others" (Piche 26).

Participating in activities with the students bring us to our fifth step, leading by example and being an inspiration. By showing respect, listening actively to their ideas, and allowing one's self to be approachable, we lead a good example. Just because Mariana and I are facilitators who have the power to create lesson plans, activities, and assignments, it does not mean that we solely have to do all the work in the classroom. Piche makes a great point by stating that:

Education in non-traditional spaces presents a unique opportunity to explore the ways in which adult learners' needs can be met in ways that include them as participants in the learning process, rather than create distance between learner and instructor. Transformative learning theory has its roots in post-colonial theory, specifically in Paulo Freire's seminal text, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). In this text, Freire differentiates between learning as 'banking' in which knowledge is deposited into students, and 'problem-posing,' in which teacher and student partake in a dual exchange of knowledge and learning. (26)

Piche illustrates in this passage the unique status facilitators/teachers may hold in an educational environment. As a facilitator, allowing one's self to be a part of the educational process throws titles and status out the window, allowing for a mutually beneficial experience. This elimination of the power struggle between a learner and an authority figure facilitates an environment where the learners feel comfortable to challenge their own notions as well as their classmates'. As the facilitators publicly present themselves as approachable and respectful students among students, it positively influences the participants to behave in a similar manner.

Scriptotherapy and its Benefits

How will others know what inmates feel or what is going on with their lives in a correctional facility when their experiences are not being written down or voiced? Writing about one's trauma, as Louise Bernice Halfe did through her poems in *Burning In This Midnight Dream*, empowers the writer to have an authorial voice and tell their own story—like a form of reflection. In "The Pen is Mightier than the Dominant Discourse" Annette Krizanich states that "Writing

about trauma enables a writer to bear witness and establish authority and voice" (396). When feminist attitudes are implemented successfully in a correctional classroom, students start to engage in scriptotherapy on their writing assignments. As correctional center facilitators, we would remind the students that they do not need to write at a personal level. However, it seems that they have gotten comfortable with sharing personal information with us. Most of them even confessed that writing helps them think and reflect on their life. To them, and to me as well, writing is a form of therapy and escape from reality; it is a way to reflect and understand one's personal trauma. Krizanich emphasizes the importance of writing as a therapeutic form of healing from trauma or illness: "scriptotherapy' can help heal a person both emotionally and physically" (396). She continues to assert that scriptotherapy can also be empowering to a person's narration: "Writing one's story ... helps give agency to survivors of trauma or illness; in many ways, [scriptotherapy] empowers" (Krizanich 397).

In the Inspired Minds classroom, a student displayed the effects of scriptotherapy through his writing assignments and class discussions. Throughout the week, he would write more than expected in writing assignments and would do so with personal reflection. When asked to only write a paragraph, he would write pages of reflective writing. However, he is not the only one. Almost everyone in the program has written personally through their writing. When given the letter-writing assignment, which is the first assignment, some students genuinely enjoyed the creative experience. A student confessed in his writing that he realizes he should write more for himself, to his girlfriend, and to his family, since they are only given a limited amount of time on the phone. Some of them admitted that when they write, it makes them think about their life, a sort of contemplation and reflection. I remember these exact words a student shared with everyone in the class where he said, "It really makes you think about your life, you know," followed by a sheepish laugh. In *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Our Stories Transform Our Lives*, Louise De Salvo states that through writing, "we revisit our past and review and revise it. What we thought happened, what we believed happened to us, shifts and changes as we discover deeper and more complex truths" (11). I agree with De Salvo, and I would also argue that through vocalizing or sharing one's writing, the receivers or listeners of the information open a new perspective. Sometimes, when they are interested and/or willing, they confidently share what they wrote to the class. There is some hesitation about the thought of sharing one's writing in the first week, but after the second session, the students become more confident in sharing and writing creatively. The writing assignments are collected every week and read only by the facilitators to review, give comments, write words of encouragement, and given back to them for keeping. I noticed through their writing that there is strong

emotion and feeling put into the words they write down. We encouraged the students to not be self-conscious with their writing. We also encourage them that they are allowed to use inarticulate words describing their feelings and honest emotions that convey their personal story rather than worrying about sounding sophisticated on paper.

Furthermore, in "The Use and Impact of Correctional Programming for Inmates on Pre- and Post-Release Outcomes," Grant Duwe appraises the Therapeutic Community (TC) model which promotes "comprehensive prosocial changes" (12). The TC model encourages participants to contribute to a therapy that works best for them through group activities such as education classes. In the case of my experience, the participants of Inspired Minds find the program helpful, encouraging, and therapeutic. However, Piche argues that the Inspired Minds program "is not therapy or considered therapeutic and instead focuses on creative expression and critical thinking" (20). I agree with Piche, but I would also argue that writing can be therapeutic to the students. As I have learned through my experience with the Inspired Minds students, it is almost impossible to write impersonally when one's identity is fragmented. "And it's the shared stories and the shared silences together," Daniel Heath Justice maintains, "that shape the complicated contours of our narrative selves" (204). Also, De Salvo argues that "writing can help anyone—not just people who consider themselves writers—significantly improve their psychological states and also their physiological well-being" (De Salvo 11). Shane Gamble, a former Inspired Minds student, can attest to De Salvo's statement sharing how the program has positively impacted his perspective on writing while being in prison: "The more I would write, it was like I was right there reliving the moment ... It's like my mind took me out of there, I was no longer in jail anymore. My mind was free to run ... it was a real powerful thing" (qtd. in EFN par. 6). Considering the psychological and physiological benefits of writing, I argue that the Inspired Minds program—although not considered therapeutic in nature—facilitates creative expression which positively contributes to the participants' overall well-being. Furthermore, the participants are able to express their feelings through creative writing instead of through violence, which is one of the components of toxic masculinity.

Educational Programming Helps in Reducing Recidivism and/or Reoffending

Because we, the facilitators, are volunteering in a low-security facility—and secondary education is only offered in medium to high-security units—we still hope that small programs, such as Inspired Minds, will help reduce reoffending rates. Acquiring education—whether it be small ones like Inspired Minds—can be a head start to reducing

recidivism and/or reoffending rates. In *From the Classroom to the Community*, Diana Brazzell et. al. maintain that education in a criminal justice system would increase employment, reduce recidivism and reoffending rates, and "improve quality of life" (2). They further state that not all inmates receive programming (Brazzell et. al. 6). I can attest to their statement because the Inspired Minds program has limited commodities with only eight seats available, added by a long waiting list. It rarely happens that one or two people from the waitlist enter the program depending on the circumstance—a student transfers to another unit, moves to a different city, or is released. Even Piche, who has experienced facilitating the Inspired Minds program, states that although "core-correctional" or "core-intervention" programs "are integral to a rehabilitative agenda, they have significant waiting lists and many individuals, particularly those serving provincial time, complete their sentences without ever being able to participate" (7). This is where community-corrections programs, such as Inspired Minds, play an important role to help prepare students to be better citizens and "work to fill some of these gaps" (Piche 8).

I also support the notion of correctional centers partnering with universities, with the leading example of Saskatoon Correctional Center Inspired Minds program partnering with the University of Saskatchewan. In "The Right to Education, Prison-University Partnerships, and Online Writing Pedagogy in the US," Joe Lockard and Sherry Rankins-Robertson address the necessity for Prison-University partnerships, and argue that the Prison-University relationship should be mandatory especially in English departments because they "can make significant contributions by raising prisons and prison narratives as teaching subjects" (29). They further argue that it does not matter if the course or the program is credit or non-credit because Prison-University partnerships are not only upholding "a mission to educate students, but also [fulfilling] an inseparable community service mission" (Lockard and Rankins Robertson 29). In addition to the argument stated above, the partnership is not only supporting something that cannot be separated and entangled, but also strengthening the notion of "education as an intrinsic right rather than a market commodity framed by corporatized universities" (Lockard and Rankins Robertson 29). Programs like Inspired Minds, however little, still make an impact and can contribute to the well-being of inmates.

Not only will educational programs that implement feminist pedagogy in a correctional center classroom be beneficial, they will also help increase self-esteem and social competence, and reduce violent behaviours; educational programs should be accessible anywhere possible. Duwe states that education programs are considered a "moderate criminogenic need" (6) and further concludes that educational programs in Correctional Centers reduce misconduct and recidivism (7). According to E.J Latessa and

C.T. Lowenkamp, criminogenic needs are “individual characteristics that increase the risk of recidivism” (qtd. in Duwe 4). For instance, Duwe lists some criminogenic needs “such as antisocial attitudes, substance abuse, and social support” (19). Furthermore, Duwe mentions “[m]oderate risk factors” that include “family/marital, education/employment, leisure/recreation, and substance abuse” (4). Although I have wanted to present data on the rates of recidivism in this paper, unfortunately, “[t]here has not been a significant improvement in the availability of recidivism data by Statistics Canada, Public Safety Canada, Correctional Service Canada, Department of Justice Canada, or any provincial correctional or justice departments” (Ahsan par. 11). Further, my supervisor Diann informed me that only core-correction programs in the Saskatoon Correctional Center keep record of recidivism rates. However, Diann attests that *any* program offered in the SCC helps in reducing recidivism, as well as maintaining family connections. I agree with Diann because, when I was gathering letter-writing assignments, most of the students shared how much they missed their family and that they should continue writing letters to them because phone time is limited. Shane Gamble shares: “I got my family back and we all have jobs. I never had structure before and I never had anything to look forward to ... I don’t want to call myself a success or anything but I’m happier” (qtd. in EFN par. 8). “Education improves decision-making skills and promotes pro-social thinking,” Brazzell maintains, “thereby improving in-prison behavior and facilitating adjustment to prison” (16). As before, they were willing and able to eliminate toxic masculinity within the Inspired Minds classroom. Diann, Mariana and I could see changes in the students’ behaviour, like helping each other with their homework, helping the other person voice their ideas in a confident manner, and writing more personally and with emotion in writing assignments.

creative writing/scriptotherapy. It has been my honour to share this educational experience with the participants of Inspired Minds, Diann Block, and Mariana.

Conclusion

In closing, implementing feminist attitudes in the Inspired Minds classroom—or any classroom for that matter—creates a contested space for active learning where students are comfortable in expressing their ideas and emotions through discussions and writing assignments. Although data regarding recidivism rates are a work in progress in Canada, educational programs like Inspired Minds help participants experience self-expression, which may lead to positive outcomes as contributing members of society. Although the Inspired Minds program is not quintessential for reducing recidivism, it can definitely be a start for someone who wants to move back into the right direction in life. Sharing this learning experience with the participants of Inspired Minds allows everyone involved in the process to partake in an educational journey and demonstrate to the inmates that anyone, regardless of writing experience, can benefit from

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