

Making Space to Learn: Prison-Less Places

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Abstract: *Diversifying modalities or modes of program delivery inside prisons is necessary and important to increase access to programs; however, this also demands that learning is intended to occur in most places of a prison. In this paper I present the concept prison-less places: relational, temporary places where the prison is less noticeable and where learning becomes possible. Exploring three dimensions of learning, I argue that the existence of prison-less places brings balance to these dimensions and is crucial for learning to occur inside prisons. As the boundaries between program and prison space become more fluid and permeable with modalities such as e-learning, self-study, and immersive programs, investigating how we can both cultivate and protect prison-less places becomes incredibly important.*

Keywords: *prison education, learning dimensions, learning spaces, liminality, relationality*

Introduction

Inside a Canadian prison,¹ it is impossible not to be reminded that you are in a place of punishment on account of its oppressive nature: surveillance, heavy doors, noise, restricted communication, and limited contact with the outside world. Given this environment, is there a limit to the amount of learning, the depth of learning, or the types of learning that can occur? In other words, is it possible to create the conditions for learning inside an oppressive institution, and, if so, what are those learning conditions?

In education, teachers often rely on artifacts to cue students to their intentions for the classroom space. The same is true in prisons; for example, Irwin provides an account of decorating and painting her classroom in order to make it “as comfortable as possible within the restrictive environment of the jail” (Irwin, 2008, p. 516). When I started my first position as a teacher in prison, I too decorated my classroom with posters, signs, and student work. However, classroom decorations are only possible when space is solely dedicated as a classroom. It is not possible when you teach in different areas of a prison or if the room serves various purposes when not occupied by students and teachers. For instance, in one of the older prisons where I worked, there was no designated teaching area in the entire facility. I spoke to some students through their meal-slots and others over the phone from officer’s desks. Infrequently, I managed to gather a small group in the corner of a unit used for storing exercise equipment and cleaning supplies. At the time, I remember wondering what I could bring with me that would be a tangible sign that people were trying to learn. Aside from books and paper, I would sometimes bring poster-board, photos, or music. Other times, I was not permitted to bring anything with me. I often wondered how these sorts of carceral situations might become favourable to learning.

This paper explores a conceptual framework for understanding how learning might be possible in carceral environments. To do this, I propose a concept called prison-less places: places inside the prison where the oppressive nature of the prison is not felt or experienced as strongly, and where common physical or affective attributes of prison are less obvious, less noticeable, or less imposing. Said another way, the pains of imprisonment (Haggerty & Bucerius, 2020) are not as apparent in prison-less places. The key impact of prison-less places is that learning occurs in these places, in part because prison-less places upset or contradict the disciplinary or punitive elements of the prison that can make learning difficult. I use the term prison-less places to bring attention to the fact that the prison and its discipline are never entirely gone. The hyphen suggests that these places are not empty of carcerality, but rather contain less evidence of it. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that in a prison-less place possibilities for learning are ameliorated or enhanced and the potential to learn is greater.

While I draw on existing education and criminological literature to support the existence of prison-less places, this framework is also grounded in practice. I incorporate and reflect on my ten years of daily experiences inside carceral spaces as both instructor and education administrator for a prison education program. I often heard people say that they “almost forgot they were in jail” during certain activities like recreation times, classes, or ceremonies. Activities that generate remarks like this are indicative of the existence of prison-less places. The “almost” part of the remark suggests that while the prison is less noticeable, it is not absent.

First, I describe the variety of activities that occur inside Canadian prisons that are connected in some way to learning. Next, I use Illeris’ learning theory (2009, 2016) to demonstrate how learning becomes more possible in prison-less places. I show that program spaces, or places of intended learning, often have prison-less qualities and argue that learning requires some aspect of prison-less-ness to occur. Returning to the notion of place, I discuss other concepts used in explorations of carceral space and contrast the purposes of these concepts with the purpose of prison-less places, which is to learn. Finally, I explore the relationality and sustainability of prison-less places, while providing some practical ideas to create a sense of prison-less-ness to foster learning in carceral environments. The focus in this paper is the learning connected to programs and activities (nonformal, formal, and incidental learning). Although discussing informal learning is beyond the scope of the current paper, I suspect that prison-less places also support and enable informal learning (learning outside of organized and institutionally sanctioned activities).²

Purposes of Programs in Canadian Prisons

Prison programs are typically thought of as organized activities encompassing education, counselling, reentry planning, chapel activities, Indigenous or other cultural activities, work assignments, bootcamps, or treatment units. In Canada, there is a broad spectrum of programs in prison; they might be individual or group-based and usually involve a leader (i.e., caseworker, teacher/facilitator, psychologist, or participant-led). Programs might occur on a schedule (i.e., once or twice a week), be a one-time occurrence, or ongoing and continuous (such as a treatment or bootcamp unit). Importantly, prison programs are much more than traditional face-to-face structured activities that might be imagined when thinking about education or learning in carceral institutions. They involve a variety of modalities: group discussion, self-study or correspondence, immersive programs, and e-learning. While many programs have a formal leader, participant-led programs and asynchronous self-directed programs also take place (i.e., Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, studying from a textbook to write a standardized exam, completing a booklet on anger management, or borrowing a book from the library).

Physically, programs in Canadian prisons are often offered in shared learning spaces. I have taught in many spaces inside prisons that may or may not have been designated for learning: classrooms, TV rooms, visiting booths, open tables. I have also taught over a phone, through doors, and across plexiglass partitions. The emergence of e-learning in prison further amplifies questions about which spaces are used for programs. While a diversity of modalities increases access (especially for those who cannot attend face-to-face programs), it also demands that programs, and therefore learning, occur in increasingly carceral places. The concept of prison-less places can enable practitioners and scholars to understand how learning might be improved or supported when programs occur outside of traditional programming space, or in a space normally used for a non-learning purpose.

In Canada, most programs in prison are somehow connected to the risk-need-responsivity framework (Andrews & Bonta, 2010). Common practice is that people in the justice system are assessed for risk level and criminogenic needs and assigned to participate in certain programs to respond to these needs. In my capacity as education administrator, I was often asked to connect the learning outcomes of the programs I oversaw to the criminogenic needs addressed in each program. In many ways, connecting learning outcomes and criminogenic needs was an oversimplification. It forced the correctional objectives to supersede other learning goals. However, every day I observed that people participate in programs for many reasons, with the least common reason being to address specific needs and risk factors. For some, programs were understood as an impetus or catalyst for change (Szifris et al., 2018). If a program provided a credential or certificate, some people would participate purely for that credential (Lindsay, 2022). Programs also helped to pass the time (Schultz et al., 2024), connect with the outside world (Buckley, 2024), and provide a place where people experienced positive interactions (Szifris et al., 2018). I have heard all these reasons why people participate in programs while they are incarcerated, along with the common sentiment that programs provide a break from prison life. It seems that people seek out prison-less places, or prison-less experiences.

The multiplicity of purposes is summed up well by the concepts of exchange value and use value (Little & Warr, 2022). The use value of education in prison identifies that programs can be viewed, experienced, designed or justified in ways that emphasize skill acquisition or development or to “make people useful beyond prison” (Little & Warr, 2022, p. 16). In contrast, exchange value highlights that educational or learning exchanges are valuable in themselves. Participating in programs is a worthy endeavour, regardless of what use might be derived from it. For Little & Warr (2022), emphasizing the exchange value of a program allows space for participants and facilitators to counter the “restrictive and punitive environment” (p. 2) of the prison that demands a useful (rehabilitative- or employment-focused) outcome in favour of “more welcoming, inclusive, and trustworthy” environments (p. 2). When I was asked to justify our programs according to criminogenic needs, we were being asked to focus on the use value of the programs, thereby amplifying the disciplinary and “correctional” intentions of the prison. I found this incredibly uncomfortable, even disingenuous, since as a group we preferred to emphasize the exchange value of our programs, or “learning for learning’s sake” (Warr, 2016).

The dichotomy between the exchange value and use value of programs illustrates why some ways of thinking about programs are personally unsettling, especially when the philosophical perspectives of a program might conflict with the purpose emphasized by the institution. Similarly, many scholars have advocated for an adult education approach to education and learning in prison (Behan, 2008, 2021; Caivano, 2025; Costelloe & Warner, 2014). With adult education, students are acknowledged as whole people, not only for their past, risk factors, or what they could contribute economically. From this perspective, there is movement away from the “skills-based acquisition model geared toward a potential economic return” (Caivano, 2025, p. 168). Education, or learning, is seen as a worthy activity instead of simply a path from training to secure employment (Costelloe & Warner, 2014). Essentially, programs that seek to emphasize their exchange value are in alignment with an adult education approach.

Learning in Prison-less Places

Given that programs in prison serve many purposes, I posit that the purpose of any program is simply to learn things – about a topic, about oneself, or about the world. The learning that happens in programs is not solely related to criminogenic risks and needs, or even skills-acquisition. Programs should not only have use value; furthermore, with an adult education approach it is incredibly problematic when the use value of a program is defined by the carceral institution and not the learner. To fully embrace the learner, their motivations and purposes for participating in programs, and the exchange value of learning the development and sustainment of prison-less places become crucial. When learning is mandated or forced, it is in danger of becoming (or has already become) part of the surveillance and disciplinary structure of the institution, and something entirely different might be learned. The concept of narrative labour demonstrates that people learn to perform a rehabilitative, penitent, or redemptive discourse (Warr, 2020). When students described an experience of forced and surveilled learning, the program space was not prison-less, and they learned to perform rehabilitation.

Jarvis (2014) defines learning as “a process whereby individuals acquire or refine knowledge and skills (and much more besides) from different sources, either intentionally or not” (p. 52). Since developing skills or knowledge results in “permanent capacity change” (Illeris, 2016, p. 3), learning is a deeply individualized process. At the same time, education research acknowledges the importance of a positive learning environment relating to quality and ease of learning; however, this research is usually related to formal learning in primary, secondary, or post-secondary schools, rather than prison (e.g., Rusticus et al., 2023). While learning is individualized and personal, it is also socially embedded. Learning is intricately connected to the social environment; this emphasizes an important association between prison-less places and the potential for learning to occur inside carceral institutions.

Recognizing the individual and social processes involved, Illeris (2009, 2016) developed a model of learning in which learning always involves three dimensions. To illustrate the dimensions, I draw on my experiences teaching in a multi-level and multi-gender classroom, where people from all general population areas of the prison attended to study everything from literacy to post-high school subjects. The first dimension of learning is the *content* that is learned, which includes the knowledge, skills, and understandings, as well as hidden and unintended content (Illeris, 2009). Content refers to both the official curriculum as well as the self-regulation and problem-solving skills that a student might learn while in class. It also includes unintended, or incidental (Turner, 2021), learning that occurs while in class; for example, how to make cake out of canteen food, how to interpret legal paperwork, or even how to perform the redemptive arc that some program providers wish to see and report on (Warr, 2020).

The second dimension is the *incentive*, or mental energy, required to learn (motivation, emotion, and willpower) (Illeris, 2009). It includes students’ reasons for their attendance in class, as well as their desire to learn subjects like math. Motivation might be simply wanting to “get off the [living] unit,” needing to complete a math course to enter a trades program, completing high school, or wanting something to “look good” on their institutional record. Both the content and incentive dimensions are individual processes and connected primarily to the learner.

In contrast, the third dimension, *interaction*, refers to the exchanges that a learner has with their environment, other people, and society (Illeris, 2009). This is the social process of learning. It encompasses the communication between the instructor and the learner, the suitability of learning materials (compare the impact of outdated second hand textbooks with new books and instructional materials), the classroom environment (including other students who might be studying similar or different content), and the situatedness of the classroom in the broader prison institution and prison in society. On one occasion my classroom was gifted new math textbooks with many errors in the answer keys. I incorrectly assumed that these errors would not matter since they were not in the main text and was instead surprised when students quickly became frustrated and demoralized. Access to appropriate learning materials certainly impacts ease of learning. However, the interactive dimension includes more than learning materials and even relationships inside the classroom boundary. For example, sometimes students would arrive on edge from an earlier incident, class would be interrupted by a search team, or a student would receive bad news about their case. The interaction dimension demonstrates that a lot of factors can impact the ease with which learning occurs, what is learned, and the prison-less-ness of the classroom.

Prison-less places are created in much the same way as other places: through relationship with people, spaces, and artifacts in often temporary spaces. A student who is participating in a self-study, paper-based program might have limited interaction with others doing the same. They also might feel a possibility of surveillance if their learning materials could be confiscated and investigated by security staff. Since they have limited interaction with the person facilitating the program, they might feel less open to sharing their reflections or taking risks to complete difficult assignments. Taken together, creating a prison-less place, and learning, might be more difficult in this situation. In contrast, that same student might feel more connected if they participate in a study group with others working through their paper-based courses. They might be able to support each other and they could have discussions that deepen learning (but are not written down to avoid some surveillance risks). These examples highlight that the modality of a program impacts the interactive dimension of learning, and that some learning places are more prison-less than others. Additionally, the degree of prison-less-ness enables the exchange value of learning to be emphasized over the institutionally directed use value.

By virtue of their modality or curriculum, some programs have less access to meaningfully created physical

By virtue of their modality or curriculum, some programs have less access to meaningfully created physical spaces. As a result, program areas vary in prison-less-ness. That is, programs delivered via a booklet, homework completed in a prison cell, or self-study programs through e-learning might not have access to much “positive pedagogical space” (Behan, 2021, p. 95). However, the interactive dimension of learning highlights that prison-less places can be created through interaction with appropriately designed content and materials. The interactive dimension also involves other people in the physical space who might not be participating in the program but are nevertheless present, such as someone reading a book at the same table as another person working through a different booklet, or being encouraged to persevere by a friend. These places might not be intentionally curated by program staff but can still take on qualities of prison-less-ness. In this way, the modality of a program can limit and determine the types of relationships, the openness of communication, and the level of surveillance that people who are incarcerated and people who are facilitating learning experience. Consequently, a program’s modality impacts the degree of prison-less-ness that can be created. Prison-less places are not only created by program or prison staff; through the interactive dimension of learning, anyone engaging in relationships with people, spaces, or artifacts can contribute to the creation of these places and support learning.

Balancing the tension field

The dimensions of learning—content, incentive, and interaction—come together in the learning process, regardless of whether the learning occurs in a formal environment like a classroom, an informal context like workplace learning, or in a prison (Illeris, 2009). Illeris (2009) refers to these dimensions as a “tension field” (p. 11); they magnify, support, or complicate the learning process:

Both the content and the incentive are crucially dependent on the interaction process between the learner and the social, societal, cultural and material environment. If the interaction... is not adequate and acceptable to the students, the learning will suffer, or something quite different may be learned, for instance a negative impression of the teacher, of some other students, of the subject or of the situation in general (p. 12).

As Illeris (2009) suggests, learning can still occur in situations where the interaction or environment is inadequate; however, it might not be the learning that was intended by the program. Prison is in general a tense learning environment, and the tension field is increasingly complex and nuanced with the overwhelming presence of punishment, correction, and oppression. In contrast, prison-less places can bring balance to the tension field by deemphasizing the disciplinary aspects and amplifying the exchange value of programs. All three dimensions of learning are components in the creation of a prison-less place.

People learn in many different environments and surroundings; we are “created to be learners,” but also “doomed” and “enforced to be learners” (Illeris, 2016, p. 1). That is, throughout our lives, people will experience a desire to learn and a need to learn, but they will also experience coerced and inescapable learning. The same is true in prison: the incentive dimension of learning is different for everyone who participates. For example, in Canada, people with specific need profiles will be advised to participate in anger management. For some, this is forced learning, while others would have enrolled without it being mandated. Joining literacy or upgrading classes can be a way to achieve an immediate learning goal but could also be experienced as inescapable learning since certain courses are mandatory or prerequisites to a course they wanted. Similarly, having a desire to learn could mean that someone connects with culture and participates in traditional teachings and practices; in their understanding, they were created for these learning experiences. Of course, these examples do not occur in isolation from each other. What one person experiences as a learning experience with rich exchange value in a prison-less place, another person might experience as mandated or forced learning with intense surveillance. Alternatively, a program that one person understands as a form of coerced learning might be experienced differently by someone else. Since learning is at different times (or all at once) needed, desired, forced, and inescapable, we experience tension between content, incentive, and interaction in a learning space. Additionally, in part because each learner brings their own incentive dimension to a learning space, the learning potential, and prison-less-ness of a place can be vastly improved when everyone is participating with similar use and exchange values.

is “crucially dependent” on the interactive dimension (Illeris, 2016), the cultivation of prison-less place both impacts and determines the possibilities and the nature of learning that occurs. Using Illeris’ terminology, prison-less places become the foundation for the interactions that enable the internal process of learning. In this way, a learning environment with some degree of prison-less-ness is crucial to the successful attainment of learning outcomes. Similarly, prison-less places are also crucial to the attainment of learning goals identified by a student, whether those goals are complementary or contradictory to institutionally defined outcomes. Prison-less places help to bring balance to the tension field.

Spaces and Places in Prison

Throughout criminological literature, scholars have identified lighter areas of the prison that contrast with the generalized heavy, oppressive prison atmosphere. Such areas have been given a variety of names: free places (Goffman, 1961), healthy or hopeful prisons (Jewkes, 2018), spheres of civility or democratic spaces (Wright & Gehring, 2008a, 2008b), emotion zones (Crewe et al., 2014), liminal spaces (Jewkes & Laws, 2021; Moran, 2013), therapeutic spaces (Jewkes & Laws, 2021), and enabling environments (Morse et al., 2022). Each of the terms above are similar to prison-less places, since they have less discipline or surveillance; however, the terms above do not focus on learning. These places are typified as straddling the inside and outside worlds, or as being a conduit for pieces of the outside world to come into prison. In a visiting area, for example, outsiders are permitted entry and insiders temporarily revert to their previous identity (Moran, 2013). In classrooms or school areas, people can begin to challenge their less-than-human prisoner status and participate in dialogue where “value, respect, worth, and even choice appear” (Wright & Gehring, 2008a, p. 252). Behan (2008) writes that “the classroom is one of the few areas of the prison where prisoners have the ultimate freedom to express themselves” (p. 129). In these places, norms of prison life are suspended or enforced less strictly (Crewe et al., 2014; Goffman, 1961; Jewkes, 2005), and with less surveillance (Goffman, 1961; Jewkes & Laws, 2021; Moran, 2013), which results in a more positive social environment (Morse et al., 2022; Wright & Gehring, 2008b). These spaces have also been described as “sanctuaries” (Wright & Gehring, 2008a), with words like “restorative” (Wright & Gehring, 2008b), “relaxed” (Goffman, 1961), “stabilizing,” and “normal” (Jewkes & Laws, 2021).

Moran and Jewkes (2015), writing broadly about prison space, challenge scholars to both “address why those spaces are as they are, and interrogate the intentions behind the design of those spaces” (p. 179). Each of the spaces identified above are intentionally designed. For example, spheres of civility provide autonomy and build relationships (Wright & Gehring, 2008b, 2008a), while healthy or hopeful prisons create “communality and socialization” (Jewkes, 2018, p. 330). In contrast, the main purpose of therapeutic spaces and enabling environments seems to be to encourage or direct personal transformation (Jewkes & Laws, 2021; Morse et al., 2022). Free places, emotion zones, and liminal spaces provide an escape from the constraints of prison; in these places activities, former identities, and emotions can be expressed that would be normally unacceptable in prison space (Crewe et al., 2014; Goffman, 1961; Moran, 2013).

Overall, the intention of prison-less places is to create a boundary in the prison in which learning is possible. The places with the most prison-less characteristics are places where learning for learning’s sake occurs and where the exchange value of learning takes priority. In other words, learning occurs in places where the oppressive nature of carceral environments is not as noticeable or imposing, and where Illeris’ tension field is balanced between content, incentives, and interactions.

Despite their association with programming space in prisons, prison-less places are not exclusively programming spaces, and not every programming space is a prison-less place. Learning is possible outside of programming space. Conversely, programming space can serve to amplify carceral power when a program attempts to manipulate behaviour and mandate transformation (Carlen & Tombs, 2006; Jewkes & Laws, 2021; Warr, 2020). Outside of programming space, emotion zones can be experienced in visiting areas, workshops, and chapels (Crewe et al., 2014). Goffman (1961), writing about free places, noted that supervision might be provided by a specialist (teacher or shop foreman) instead of a correctional officer. These places exist in part because they are consciously cultivated in contrast, or even in opposition, to prison-space. A free place, emotion zone, or democratic space might become a prison-less place if they enable or support learning, and dimensions of learning are present.

Prison-less places have relational and temporal aspects that impact the ability of people to create and sustain prison-less places as locations for learning. These aspects determine how people experience the content, incentives, and interactions required to learn. Below, I explore the relationality and sustainability of prison-less places, connect these elements to existing literature on place, and provide practical implications for people who want to create conditions for learning inside carceral environments.

The Relationality of Prison-less Places

To understand prison-less places, it is important to consider the interactions and relationships that people have with their surroundings, including other people, the physical space, artifacts, and the meanings that they attribute to the space. The relationality of prison-less places is directly connected to the interactive dimension of learning. Tuan (1979) discusses place as inherently relational; as opposed to space, which is a measurable physical location. Place has meaning that is steeped in the experiences of people who embody it: “people talk of the ‘spirit’, the ‘personality’, and the ‘sense’ of place” (Tuan, 1979, p. 409). Prison-less places are these sorts of places; they are deeply relational. A place takes on prison-less qualities as a result of what happens in and around it, as well as the people and activities that inhabit it, that support and enable learning. Relationality, as part of the interactive dimension, enables positive, human interactions and ways of relating to content, oneself (incentive), and others that enable learning. The relationships and processes in a prison-less place highlight the exchange value of education and provide the foundation for people to engage with each other and program content and ultimately learn.

Although not explicitly describing oppressive situations like prison, Thrift (2003) uses the term “place space” to discuss how “certain spaces are more human than others” (p. 102). He noted that people can “open up little spaces in which they can assert themselves” (p. 103); in the same way, people “open up” or create prison-less places. Importantly, the ability to open up prison-less places involves recognition of the opportunity to do so, perhaps through spatial cues, memory, or behaviour. A classroom, booklet, or e-learning platform might become a place for people to explore more of their humanity. Students in prison have told me that they can tell whether a program will be a place they can “forget prison” from the way that a program is described and from the first glimpse of the room layout and course materials. The content, materials, and environments of certain programs can serve as signals that prison-less places are possible.

Certain places in the prison are more human than other places, and when I teach, I aim to create places and experiences that are more human. I do this through attempting to engage with people on a personal level and resisting the power imbalances inherent in carceral spaces, similar to the suggestions of other educators (Caivano, 2025). As noted in the introduction, decorating a space can signal to students that an instructor intends to create a prison-less place. Prison-less place can also be signaled by having good quality learning materials, incorporating choice in program activities, and limiting artifacts that remind students of the prison. Demonstrating that students are worthy of quality, and viewing learning as a worthwhile endeavour, can create prison-less places that balance the interactive and content dimensions of learning.

People who enter any space interpret the meanings behind objects that are present, the interactions between inhabitants of the space, and the boundaries and processes that define the space. As noted earlier, prison-less places enable learning by balancing the tension field of content that is to be learned, the motivations of the students (and teachers) to be present, and interactions between materials, people, and environments. For example, when people attend programs hoping to “get off the unit,” their motivations can be interpreted as seeking a break from their prison-space. This intention creates an opening for prison-less place. Even though an incentive to “get off the unit” might not be seen as a learning-based reason to participate in a program, a facilitator can acknowledge this as a valid motivation and develop relationality on this incentive. Ultimately, it results in learning.

The Sustainability of Prison-less Places

Prison-less places exist because they are purposefully created to support and enable learning. It follows, therefore, that as soon as this cultivation is withdrawn, the punitive carceral environment takes over. “A prison is a prison,” and, as such, the prison environment will always lurk (Carlen & Tombs, 2006, p. 342). As Behan (2021) explains in regards to education, tension between education and the prison is ever-present:

Imprisonment is essentially about exclusion – from family, friends, the community and society. Education, on the other hand, is about inclusion. How do we navigate this dichotomy and create a space in which prisoners can engage in education in a place of coercion? It is likely that the provision of education in prison will always be a challenge. Structural and institutional impediments to the creation of positive pedagogical spaces are inherent in a coercive environment. (p. 95)

Because they contrast with the normative prison environment, prison-less places are temporary. The same room can be a holding tank, a recreation space, or a classroom; if the space is entered at the right time, by the right people, in the right way, it can become something different. With the right content, incentive, and interactions, spaces can take on characteristics of prison-less-ness and people can learn.

Since prison-less places require energy to sustain, the concept of liminality (Jewkes, 2005; Jewkes & Laws, 2021; Moran, 2013) can be applied. Liminality refers to spaces and identities in transition, originally pertaining to people in ritualistic rites of passage (Turner, 1977). Experiences of the liminal phase are described as being an ambiguous state: “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1977, p. 95), “in and out of secular social structure” (p. 98). In prison-less places the prison is “less” and not “absent,” and people are both-and: LEARNER and prisoner, or more broadly, SELF and prisoner. The interactions, incentives, and content that exist in prison-less places emphasize and acknowledge the learner- and self-identity of the people in the place over the prisoner identity (as emphasized here with capital letters).

In prison-less places, the prisoner-identity is temporarily set aside to make way for a more authentic identity, and the space takes on attributes that are not normally ascribed to prisons. Moran (2013) noted that in visiting spaces within prison, liminality does not manifest linearly. People do not travel through the visiting space and emerge with a new identity. Instead, they return to the prison and their prisoner status. Moran (2013) theorized that this repetitive experience of liminality is cumulative and might contribute to the positive impact of visitation. However, the repetition was also painful; once experiencing the liminal space, they had to return to prison space.

Similarly, people who participate and learn in a prison-less place return to their prisoner status when the prison-less place closes. Thus, space and identity are both liminal, representing a nonlinear or truncated transformation. However, while prison-less places might be temporary, the impact upon someone can be continuing and cumulative. That is, whatever is learned in a prison-less place does not disappear with the place. In one institution, as teachers we often noticed that the way students walked down the programs’ hallway was different than the way they walked through the rest of the prison. Students took on visibly different aspects of their identity when they entered prison-less places, and this was also a way that they signaled to others their incentives and intention to learn.

Banfield (2022) noted that liminal spaces are often nested, staggered, and mobile; that is, they exist in connection with other spaces and other liminal spaces. Often the boundaries or thresholds of the spaces are ambiguous (Banfield, 2022). This might be especially true for prison-less places connected to immersive programs like bootcamp or treatment units, where a physical boundary is more fluid. Additionally, self-study, correspondence, or e-learning programs might occur in cells or public areas directly connected to prison spaces, making the prison-less place more fleeting and the balance in the tension field more precarious. Since the content and modality of each program play a large role in whether program space can become prison-less, programming space varies in degrees of prison-less-ness, and prison-less places move and flow around the prison, opening and closing as opportunities permit.

In some ways, prison-less places are bounded (i.e., to a TV-room, table, classroom, or chapel), even if they occasionally have ambiguous thresholds. Thrift (2003) describes “unblocking space” as flows and pathways instead of bounded static space. When I met with self-study participants in maximum security, I often had to speak with them through a telephone or through the meal-slot in their door. Obviously, these locations were less than ideal and still dominated by reminders of prison space, but the interactions we had could be understood as creating a prison-less place (however small and incredibly fleeting).

In a similar way, a student completing a program on a tablet could create a prison-less place wherever they begin to work through their coursework, perhaps even drawing others into the place who want to read, write, or work on their own programs. When we distributed self-study workbooks, we noticed that students would sometimes complete them together. Prison-less places can be represented by flows and pathways: of instructors, of content, of participants.

Recognizing that prison-less places are temporary, requiring work and energy to sustain, a teacher or program leader can make their intention to create a prison-less place explicit. They can outline the aspects of the tension field – content, incentive, and interaction – and encourage students to understand these as conditions for learning. They can ensure access to appropriate learning materials and model supportive interactions both in the program and with other areas of the prison. They can also help to balance the tension field when the carceral environment seeps in with deescalation and interpersonal skills. In my class, it was sometimes necessary to put the planned work on hold in order to debrief and explore situations that had disrupted the group. By doing this, I was able to sustain the prison-less place by honouring students’ humanity, rebalance the tension field by focusing on interactions, and shift the content to immediately relevant topics.

Conclusion

Education, and programs more broadly, have a tremendous capacity to make places inside the prison feel less like a prison, and impact daily prison life. In constructing the conceptual framework of prison-less places, I drew on the language commonly used by my former students in prison, that they temporarily forgot they were in prison during certain programs. Reflecting on my experiences as an educator in prison helps to understand how these prison-less places emerge, and how we can sustain them given the ever-present carceral environment. I noticed that my former students seemed to seek out experiences that helped them forget their incarceration.

I am currently conducting research to further explore my theorizing of prison-less places, including the experiences of people who create and maintain these spaces while they live and work in prison, and the impact of prison programs on daily prison life. I hope this research can expand upon how learning ebbs and flows through prison-less places and how prison-less-ness responds to shifts in all three dimensions of learning: the content that is learned, the incentives people have to learn, and the interactions in and beyond learning spaces.

Learning can, and does, occur in many spaces inside prisons. These spaces can be seen as connected flows, pathways and bounded spaces that are characterized by degrees of prison-less-ness. Since prison-less places emerge when the tension field of learning is balanced, the concept enables us to visualize and understand how different spaces in a prison can support or complicate learning. We can recognize the complications and contradictions inherent in learning within carceral institutions by examining the prison-less-ness of spaces where programs occur or learning is intended. The concept of prison-less places also provides direction for people who cultivate and sustain learning spaces in prisons whether they are working, living or visiting; they can assess the tension field in a place and identify interventions to rebalance it. That is, the concept of prison-less places helps us understand how someone, with specific motivations, can learn content through interactions with learning material, spaces, other people and artifacts. Practically, this can be applied to program and curriculum development, design of temporary or permanent learning space, and support for people who are participating in programs. As the boundaries between program and prison space become more fluid and permeable with modalities such as e-learning, self-study, and immersive programs, investigating how education providers, facilitators, and others can both cultivate and protect prison-less places becomes incredibly important.

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Endnotes

1 Buildings that incarcerate people are generally given names based on the purpose, length, and jurisdiction of incarceration. In Canada, provinces oversee incarceration of less than two years in buildings generally called “correctional centres.” Provinces also oversee incarceration for people awaiting trial in “remand centres.” The federal government is responsible for the administration of sentences over two years in facilities that are typically called “institutions” or “penitentiaries.” Throughout, I refer to locations of incarceration as prisons or carceral institutions. In using these terms I am referring to all the different places described above.

2 For a description of the different types of learning, see Turner (2021).