The social organization of unconventional teaching settings often creates problems that make delivery of educational programs especially difficult. But such settings may contain an ironic *potential in that the problems they present may require solutions that allow participants to transcend the immediate conditions and create something quite new. Maximum security prisons typify an extreme example of an unconventional setting that subverts yet stimulates creative teaching strategies. By conceiving of teaching as a form of* social praxis, *it becomes possible to transform ostensible problems and conflict into pedagogical and practical advantages. This discussion will examine the social order in one maximum security prison and suggest how the ironic potential generated may be relevant to other unconventional settings.*

Teaching Sociology in Unconventional Settings

The Irony of Maximum Security Prisons

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I f teaching undergraduate social science courses in conventional academic settings provides a challenge to instructors, presenting sociology in unconventional environments can be even more demanding.[1] Maximum security prisons typify an extreme example of an unconventional setting that both subverts, yet stimulates, creative teaching strategies. Because of the demands for institutional security and the general indifference—even hostility—of many administrators and an unsympathetic public, the emphasis on prison education is usually considered to be at best a tolerated amenity and at worst a hindrance to prison administration. Because of current fiscal retrenchment at both state and federal levels, it appears probable that prison college programs will be deemphasized or eliminated, thus increasing

pressures on instructors to deliver quality education with decreasing resources.[2] This is a problem shared as well by instructors in other so-called marginal academic programs and settings, which suggests that the lessons described here are relevant to those who deliver social science courses in a variety of unconventional settings.

Social science instructors in unconventional settings are often viewed suspiciously both by staff (who may see courses as "radical" and the instructors as prisoner advocates or troublemakers) and prison residents (who may perceive courses as containing an ethnic or class bias and the college program and instructors as placating mechanisms used to control residents). As Galliher (1981) has observed:

> The most obvious and unique structural characteristic that all prison teachers encounter is a caste system where one is forced to take sides. Everyone in prison is either identified with the staff and therefore everything they do is seen as attempted manipulation by the prisoners, or one is linked to the prisoners and seen as a troublemaker—radical by the staff. Those instructors who try to steer a middle-course will probably end up being distrusted by prisoners and staff members. If the instructor is identified closely with the staff, prisoners will indeed see the course as a "sham."

This requires the development of course content and teaching strategies that allow the instructor to slip through the Scylla of suspicion and the Charybdis of institutional control while simultaneously retaining intellectual and personal integrity. The subject matter of the social sciences is ironic in that it contains both an emancipatory potential and a constraining element, as reflected in the antinomies of constraint/liberation, dogma/knowledge, and chaos/unity that remove these teaching experiences from the ostensibly discouraging context of a limiting and frustrating situation and reframe them as a quite different

experience with the potential for student-instructor involvement and interaction. As a consequence, problems that would seem to suppress effective teaching have the potential for developing imaginative and creative strategies that contribute to effective learning as well as to more creative teaching by instructors, which can in turn be implemented in other settings.

Most discussions of teaching in maximum security prisons have tended to focus on personal accounts within a specific institution (see Omark, 1976; Pollack, 1979; George et al., 1980; Kandal, 1981; White, 1981), organizational problems (Bell et al., 1979; Goldin and Thomas, 1981), problems of institutional social order upon learning (Cohen and Taylor, 1972), or specific course content (R. Thomas, 1981; Decker, 1980). There remains, however, a void in our understanding of the structural, organizational, and similar problems that illustrate the irony of social science college programs in prison. The intent of this article is to identify several common problems in maximum security institutions, to describe their effect on teaching, and then to explore possible strategies for circumventing these problems. The example of sociology is used to suggest ways of coping with the difficulties of delivering educational services in unconventional settings.

PRISON PROBLEMS AND THE
EFFECT ON TEACHING

Those unfamiliar with prison educational settings often perceive the most difficult problems to lie in the nature of the students, who are presented in conventional prison literature and popular media as aggressive, unruly, undisciplined, and generally difficult to "handle." This image is perpetuated largely because maximum security institutions usually house habitual offenders and those adjudicated of violent felonies. Whatever the personal attributes that resulted in incarceration, however, these popularly perceived attributes have been neither a significant problem nor even particularly evident in the program in which this study was conducted.[3] Many other problems remained, however, induced

by a combination of fiscal, institutional, social, and discretionary factors. Especially salient problems include the following:

(1) ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE

A recurrent theme among most residents is the belief that the educational program is structured *not* to succeed. This is because the organizational conditions in which the program exists are perceived to mitigate against both the perception of and the possibility for strong institutional commitment to education. Bell et al. (1979) have listed twenty "issues" that reflect these structural obstacles, including, for example, the lack of basic administrative mechanisms by which students can resolve academically related procedural problems and the lack of measurable program goals around which to construct a viable program.[4] These factors are compounded by a lack of effective training of instructors *prior* to teaching in unconventional settings and by the lack of systematic and sustained curricula in most programs. Students often feel that the program is an afterthought designed to symbolize commitment to education and thus present the facade of "rehabilitation" rather than actually deliver a viable program. One resident in the program complained:

> You have guys here who are interested in economics or business, but the courses that are brought down are not geared toward their interests. You have guys here who should have graduated five or ten years ago, from college, who have that many credits. They've been in other institutions, and they've got credit, and there's nothing here for the degrees that they want. And I'm saying that if the educational program doesn't address their needs, then what good is it? It's a shell. And it seems as though it's a plot, as though someone is sitting around somewhere saying "give them the bare minimum."

Whatever the truth of these observations, they indicate the degree of suspicion in which residents hold the program and instructors. One resident employed as a teacher in the prison G.E.D. program confronted a new instructor and asked, "What's your scam down here, man? Everybody else's got one!"

(2) FISCAL PROBLEMS

Minimal resources, created by fiscal necessity, affect all state institutions, especially prisons (see Thomas et al., 1981). It is therefore not surprising that there are not adequate funds with which to create strong educational programs. It is also difficult to maximize existing resources or imaginatively to create new sources of educational materials. Although the state purchases students' books, expenditures are limited to $25 per course, instructors are poorly paid, discouraging most from teaching, and inflation and fiscal retrenchment have reduced the number of courses that can be delivered each year. This increases student cynicism and suspicion toward the program and prompts some students to withdraw when their curriculum needs can no longer be met.

(3) STAFF DISCRETIONARY BEHAVIOR

Discretionary opposition to programs is reflected in petty harassment of instructors and students by correctional officers, bureaucratic delays in obtaining books, delayed starting dates for courses, institutional "lock downs" (when the entire prison population is confined to cells), arbitrary rules and capricious enforcement or exercise of authority by guards (or creation of "new" policies on the spot), consistently late arrivals and early departures of students to class, and consistent refusal by adminis-trators fully to utilize existing regulations pertaining to the implementation of programs. Such opposition makes it difficult for students to act like students and creates tension between instructors and staff in that instructors must be extremely careful not to let their own actions serve as an opportunity for guards to harass students. As Goldin and Thomas (1981) have illustrated, staff may use instructors' behavior as an occasion for intimidat-ing, humiliating, or disciplining students. Such opposition has discouraged some instructors from returning to the institution, dissuaded others from participating on a more regular basis, and contributed to others simply quitting in the middle of a term or not participating at all.

(4) DIFFERENT STUDENT BACKGROUNDS

A critical problem in teaching in most adult education programs is the difference in levels of proficiency, familiarity with the material, and commitment of students to the topic, all of which vary dramatically in prison populations. In this institution, ironically, more students have some background in sociology than in other courses, but the variation in age, educational goals, interests, motivations, and postrelease aspirations compound the problem. For some, education relieves boredom, provides an opportunity to leave the cell house, or provides the only alternative to meaningless work assignments (if assignments are available). Further, some students are graduates of the prison G.E.D. programs and have had no contact with college students on any level, while others have varying degrees of college education, including some with post-B.A. degrees. This difference in intellectual background and educational socialization experience makes uniform course development especially difficult.

(5) SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF PRISONS

Prison social order creates particularly difficult problems. Prisons are simply not pleasant places for civilians or residents, and there often arises a social system appropriate to and reflective of this unpleasantness.[5] This can affect classroom activity in several ways. For example, sociology courses often tend to deal with controversial topics and are conducive to class discussion (more so, for instance, than foreign languages or science). This can generate potentially volatile debate in which such topics as race, religion, social control, gangs, or the nature of the criminal justice system itself stimulates animosity among students, the instructor, or the social system. Personal hidden agendas (such as animosity toward specific individuals or between inmate factions, release of general tension, or needs to achieve in a classroom setting) exacerbate the problem. This requires that an instructor not only know the students, but also be constantly sensitive to the "moods" of the prison and to the social order that generates potential problems. Among a population for whom classroom

participation may become an outlet for a variety of frustrations or may provide an opportunity to "prove" oneself in a manner perhaps not possible in daily prison life, open discussion can become a latent conflict situation with considerable potential for displays of pent-up aggression, abuse, and even domination or violence.[6] For example, "gang" influence may discourage some unaffiliated students from participating as freely as they may desire. Although these "illicit organizations" may often serve a necessary (though disruptive and predatory) function within the institution (see Thomas et al., 1980), they can become a dangerous and disruptive factor in the educational system. An unaffiliated former education clerk at this institution, for example, assumed his position during a period of gang influence in the program. After successfully neutralizing their influence, he prudently withdrew from his position and placed himself in protective custody for six months because of threats against him for his actions. Another student was no longer able to enroll in class because:

> I got in a fight with some of the gangbangers [gang members]. . . . They thought I was saying something about one of them, and I had some words with one. . . . He came to my cell later and came inside the door a bit. Four other fellows pushed their way in behind him. He's about my size [six-foot three, about 250 pounds] and they stood there. . . . The fellow pulled out a lead pipe out of his shirt, and raised it up like he was going to hit me.

The student placed himself in protective custody and was soon transferred to another institution without a viable educational program. These examples typify the ways social organization can effect students' classroom participation and behavior.[7] Social conditions also create an environment that makes it extremely difficult to study, as one student explained:

> [Q: What makes it difficult to study?]
>
> Just the people coming in. It depends if you're in a cell by yourself, if you've got cellies. If you've got cellies, then you've got to contend with radio and television, with different types of conversation that might not be a part of you, or that you might not be interested in. Or you might have a problem with not being able to study late at

night, or not being able to study early in the morning, or you might
have a problem getting to sleep, or you might want to go to sleep at
a certain time, and somebody just want to be up all day and all
night. So you run into different types of personality clashes within
the institution that you have to adjust yourself to. Or you might
come into a house where a couple of the officers, or maybe the
captains or the supervisors [hassle you]. . . . This brings strains
on you.

Another student provided an account (independently corrobo-
rated by others) for why his paper was not completed on time:

I'm a victim of harassment [laughs]. Now, the only thing I had to
write up was the summary. And they [the guards] moved me out of
[my cell] at seven o'clock, and I gets up—and they moved me out
of the cell I was in. . . .There was nobody in the cell but me, and
they came in and now put me in the cell with three other guys, and
they all come in the cell new together, and they was arguing, and
they started pulling me off into the argument, and I get to arguing
with them. Now we got one guy in the cell who has an assignment,
and he goes to work at five o'clock in the morning. And he wants
the lights out at nine o'clock, and I told him I got to do work, and
he says "hey, I gotta go to work at five o'clock in the morning," and
so I shut off the lights, and we, me and the other guys [laughs] we
get to arguing in the dark, and this goes on until two o'clock in the
morning. And the other guy, the guy who got to go to work in the
morning [laughs] he gets mad, and he cusses us out. OK, so
another guy, he's a Muslim. And this is Ramadan period. So they
got to get up to eat before the sun comes up. So at three o'clock,
four o'clock in the morning, the police [lieutenants] come and pick
them up and take them out to chow so they can eat. Now, I'm in
bed and hear this, and I think they're coming to get me, you know
what I'm saying, 'cause that's how they do. They come early in the
morning and get you [for punishment], and I was thinking they're
coming to get me. . . . So I lay back down, now my cellie wakes me
up when he leaves, so I can go on sick call, and when I come back,
they move another guy in. Yeh, five [in the cell for four]. They
move some other guy in. And he decide he can't move in, he don't
want to move in, and he moves out, and they move another guy in.
And the police come, and we said, "Hey, you can't move five in,
'cause there ain't no bed, and we ain't gonna put another bed in.
so he moves out. The other guy, he decides he don't want to move
in with these other guys, so he wants out, 'cause they was
arguing—all night long, all day long, guys was coming in the cells,

guys is coming back to the cells, guys is looking for cells, and that's why I didn't do my paper.

Although the story was told with humor, it emphasizes the importance of instructor sensitivity to problems of minimal study facilities, continuous clamor of guards, and similar disruptions, all compounded by hostile cellmates or staff, poor lighting, and institutional security needs (headcounts, lockdowns, and so on). These conditions create continual tension that affects not only studying but classroom interaction as well. When tension levels rise throughout the institution, it is reflected in the classroom through decreased concentration, increased moodiness and anxiety and tendencies toward generalized hostility, making effective communication and full participation especially difficult.

(6) COURSE MATERIAL

The nature of sociological subject matter can also create difficulties. Prison students often share their university counterparts' doubt of the utility of sociology courses and degrees. The conventional nature of most social and criminological theory creates for many residents a suspicion that such courses are just another control technique, reflecting white, middle-class ideology and values. Conventional courses are often seen as an "indoctrination" mechanism used to "reprogram" students, and some students, especially minorities, stay away and attempt to discourage others (through persuasion, *not* intimidation) from enrolling. Some students are candid in their views that sociology courses are a first and necessary step in developing a more relevant curriculum in business, economics, and other "practical" areas by using an existing program as a demonstration project to entice others to participate. Further, guards' perceptions of sociology, derived in part from their judgments of book topics, class discussions, and snatches of conversation they overhear, often remain, judging from their comments and actions, that it is nothing but a body of subversive, decontrol-oriented ideas that function to make their job more difficult.[8]

In sum, the problems identified here, although found to some degree in even the most conventional settings, are more magnified

in such dreadfully unconventional enclosures as prisons. The strategies employed to overcome these problems should, as a consequence, be applicable to both conventional and unconventional situations.

THE IRONY OF SOCIOLOGY:
SOCIOLOGY AS PRAXIS

One advantage of sociology over other types of courses is that the subject matter requires that students examine the social conditions that shape their current existence. Sociology, even in the most oppressive of total institutions, contains an emancipatory potential in that the material presented not only encourages imparting information, but requires actively creating conceptual tools for analysis within the immediate as well as the larger social situation. It is, in fact, the very oppressiveness of many unconventional settings that generates the dynamics and impetus for learning. If the subject matter of sociology, especially for analytic and critical elements that require rigorous and systematic examination of social structures, institutions, and social interaction, is combined with involvement by students, it becomes possible to turn a course in sociology into an *event*, a *practical* exercise in modest, but quite useful, applied human activity. Sociology in this sense becomes nothing less than social *praxis*.

Praxis refers to "world constituting activity," that is, to those forms of human behavior that function to transform our symbolic or physical environment in a fundamental way. Unlike social *practice*, which refers to those taken-for-granted behaviors into which we enter in the normal course of living, *praxis* is metaphorically the deeper layer of activity by which social relations and arrangements are continuously reproduced or transformed. Rather than view sociology as simply the means by which we examine and communicate our findings of society (whether verbally, as in most symbolic interactionist research, or in an alternative language system, as in the numbers theory that underlies positivism), the nature of sociology contributes to turning a course into not simply an exercise in observation, but a method of application. There are several strategies that were

useful for teaching sociology as *praxis* in this setting. The two most useful were *involvement* and *struggle*.

(1) INVOLVEMENT

Because of the different backgrounds, expectations, personal agendas, and modes of interaction in unconventional settings, it is often difficult for the instructor to develop the specific content of the course or to plan pedagogical techniques prior to the first class meeting. Even then, it is difficult immediately to develop a course because of unfamiliarity with the setting, instructor insensitivity to or ignorance of problems involved in studying, or inability to overcome specific obstacles (such as the hostility of particular guards to specific students). By allowing students from the first day actively to *participate* in the development of the course content and direction, it becomes possible to overcome many of these problems. It must be emphasized that this approach is not, despite similar terminology, identical to so-called organic approaches to education in which the instructor's authority, responsibility, or level of involvement is relinquished. The instructor retains control of course content and procedure but shapes them in accordance with the needs of both the setting and students. This orientation is akin to a form of social anthropology that allows the *objects* of the setting themselves to become the *subjects* of those activities initially *directed at* them. This is also similar to "participatory research" (see Cain, 1977; Heaney, 1981) in that those who receive the attention of the outsider actively shape the outsider's stance by assisting in defining, interpreting, and discoursing on the situation. Teaching strategies in this sense become carefully negotiated in that the *process* of pedagogy is recognized as demanding continual feedback and reassessment between and by students and instructors. This establishes the most appropriate and effective avenues by which the goals of education (for example, development of reading and writing skills, development of critical and intellectual capability, and imparting information) can be achieved. Because in this particular setting the students were older than the typical undergraduate (average age was about 30), they brought into their involvement a breadth of experience—mostly negative or

hostile—with previous educational environments. Requiring participation was therefore also a way of removing the instructor from the defensive by making students themselves responsible and accountable for developing techniques to overcome existing classroom problems.

(2) STRUGGLE

Involvement implies direction and goal orientation in the classroom in that the instructor becomes an *active* guide, directly sensitive and responsive to the needs and problems of students. This is a form of collective education in that traditional boundaries between students and instructor partially dissolve as a means of mutual recognition of problems participants face. Collective education can, of course, occur through "rap sessions," study groups, or other situations in which participants engage in reciprocal interaction in order to discuss material or engage in "information transfer." Although such an approach may on occasion be useful in unconventional settings, it fails to take advantage of the potential for *praxis* inherent in sociology. Because unconventional settings often require that specific conditions be addressed in order for learning to take place, struggle becomes a useful *orienting metaphor* by which we can focus our attention and activity. By recognizing that even the most mundane sociology course (such as methods or formal organizations), in addition to dramatically relevant courses (such as penology or social problems) can be used as *instruments* in struggle against the problems of education, the instructor finds it easier to involve even those students who might be hostile to particular courses or to the entire program, directing course content to their own particular needs or interests. Social theory, for example, can be used to develop arguments and rationales in petitions by students to state officials requesting improvement of educational (or even prison) conditions, an activity that several students have developed into an impressive skill (see Chaka and Thomas, 1981). Conceptual thinking is useful in arguing for particular curricula or for specific resources. "Jail-house lawyers" often take courses to develop skills by which they may more effectively write and file legal briefs (e.g., Chaka and Thomas,

1981). By recognizing that sociology offers a wide variety of advantages in addressing the conditions of prison existence as they affect education, students are able to apply courses as a weapon in their struggle to survive and retain their dignity within the setting.

Several strategies used in the particular setting illustrate how sociology can be used as a form of *praxis* in an attempt to overcome the problems of unconventional situations.

Perhaps the first problem one confronts in some settings is that of being an *outsider*, or Simmel's (1964: 402-408) "stranger." This contributes to an ethnocentrism in which pedagogical, communicative, interactional, and related goals and techniques developed elsewhere are *presumed* to be appropriate, relevant, and effective in the unconventional classroom. When dramatic cultural and racial cleaveages appear to separate students and instructor (as might occur, for example, when an activist Berkeley professor teaches law to a group of Atlanta police), it is especially important to become familiar with the specific problems, biases, and needs of the class if the course is to have any hope of success. This requires continual interaction with students, including, in prisons, returning to cellhouses, participating as much as possible in daily activities in order to develop a sense of inmates' problems, and being available as much as the setting allows. The suggestion here is not that an instructor befriend students, for this may or may not be possible or desired. The assumption is that cultures reflect a variety of behavioral codes, or languages, and that effective instruction requires learning how to decode and recode the subtleties of "cultural language" to succeed in unfamiliar settings. More simply, instructors in unconventional settings can use the tools of cultural anthropology, especially ethnography, in the attempt to reduce their outsider status.

A second way of employing the practical potential of sociology entails developing class projects. In this institution, research projects became a way of focusing on the specific problems that constrained education. Such topics as "why it is hard to study in prisons," "how staff facilitate or hinder education," and "'doing time' as an obstacle to education" typify projects that challenged students to examine the relationship between their environment and courses. Such projects required an objective assessment of

students' own actions and interaction, provided a critique of instructors and programs, and were useful in showing the relevance of sociology to understanding prison existence. Goffman's dramaturgical model, for example, provided a metaphor for displaying the ways guards and inmates created "fronts" through which each managed the other. This helped defuse at least some (but by no means all) of the anger some residents felt toward guard behaviors in the classroom.

Third, especially for criminal justice, deviance, and related courses, prisons contain a captive (so to speak) audience, which is a primary resource material for ethnographic studies or case histories in crime and deviance. At this institution, an ethnographic/qualitative methods course provided an opportunity to examine prison social organization and social structure. The result led to a collectively authored publication critiquing a dominant essay on prisons (Thomas et al., 1980). The publication dramatically increased the credibility of sociology courses, the students, and the instructor, and it provided a goal for future classes, which, while not always met, has remained an underlying agenda for at least some classes and students and has provided a powerful motivating force for all participants.

Fourth, individual student papers (such as Chaka, 1980), or papers co-authored by students and instructors (and even papers such as this) are a means of stimulating students and simultaneously reflecting a form of *praxis*. For example, one student's analysis of prison existence was sufficiently insightful that he co-authored a paper on prison racial problems with an instructor. Two student-instructor collective papers were ultimately published, and one student had a paper accepted at a regional sociology convention. Although an apparently "assured" furlough request to present the conference paper was ignored until *after* the conference (when it was then denied), the episode was used as an opportunity to raise questions about the educational furlough system and was useful in demonstrating to civilians the difficulties in delivering educational services in less-than-optimal environments.

Fifth, sociology, because it is akin to what O'Neill (1972: 3-10) has called a *skin trade*, offers the possibility of symbiotic

connections between those who practice it and those upon whom it is practiced. Analytic student papers addressing problems in the prison education program consistently complained that one crucial problem was the lack of opportunity to interact with civilian students. Some students, drawing from the metaphors of social theory, indicated that such deprivation reflected a form of "boundary maintenance" designed to isolate prisoners, reflected the class dominance of white society, or prohibited prisoner development by limiting "peer influence" to a "criminal caste." From the insights and considerable energy and enthusiasm the papers generated, the students essentially challenged their instructor to "put social theory into practice" and conduct a campus class *inside the prison itself* with both civilian and prisoner students. Although the problems initially seemed insurmountable, a penology course seemed an ironically appropriate first-attempt. With a bit of negotiation and seemingly interminable delays, the administration agreed. Although the course was originally limited to eighteen to twenty students (half from each group), the enrollment nearly doubled because of preliminary student response. As a *practical* activity, this integrated class has served the educational interests of both groups by providing each with experiences (created by the other) which would have otherwise been unobtainable. Experiencing firsthand the problems of education in prison, the campus students are able to experience also some of the horror of the maximum security prison as a *dreadful enclosure.* Further, by debating the substance and application of social theory as mediated by the dramatically different backgrounds of the two groups (one all white, largely female, and suburban; the other nonwhite, male, and inner-city), the members of each group have substantially modified their original conceptions both of civilians/prisoners (see Holtzman, 1982: 5) and of sociology. This type of class functions also as a form of "outreach," publicizes and dramatizes sociology curricula, and, most important, concretely illustrates to participating students the relevance of sociological analysis and theory by demonstrating both in an on-site situation.

These selected examples were the direct result of student involvement in their courses as a form of struggle and *praxis.* The

strategies of involvement and struggle have the advantage of requiring minimal fiscal resources and require no "authorization" from administration. The impact in this institution, while modest, was nonetheless effective and quite encouraging to students, instructor, and at least some staff.[9] Results included an increased credibility of the college program and especially of the students among other educators at the host institution, an increased willingness of prison students to enroll in sociology courses, a decrease in suspicion toward sociology by students, and the personal gain of some students who—on the basis of their performance—were rewarded by modestly increased status in the institution, possible transfer to more desirable institutions with better educational facilities, and admission to graduate school. One student was released and is currently excelling (in communication studies) at the host university.

It would be both misleading and gratuitous to imply that these results are particularly profound. It would also be absolutely erroneous to conclude that such "successes" are evidence that the prison educational program is not fundamentally flawed and in need of radical change. Even though the results of these classroom strategies have contributed minimally to decreasing some of the effects of structural and other impediments, the sources of the problems still exist, and nothing in this discussion must be construed as suggesting that temporary ameliorating devices are even a partial substitute for the need of fundamental changes in the relationship between prisons and society. The intent of this article has been only to suggest that the immediate disruptive problems that may occur in unconventional settings may generate sufficient emancipatory potential to offer some short-term success. Effective education not only changes students and instructor, but also helps transform the social world. By changing how we view the world, we change also how we act within it. Developing new strategies in unconventional settings reflects a continuous dissolving of consciousness and reconstruction of new awareness that alerts us to how we can—even in tightly controlled settings—be a force of emancipatory opposition. This also suggests that although there is in this study no evidence of the impact of education on recidivism, educational experience in these prison courses profoundly changed the

observed behavior of many participating students, developed new skills, and created an enthusiasm for education among some that has led to an aggressive pursuit of further education both within and beyond the walls. It is this dialectical process of personal involvement and change and of social struggle that makes teaching in unconventional settings a potential form of *praxis.*

CONCLUSION

This article has not been intended simply as a list of selected problems involved in teaching in maximum security prisons. Most of these problems, after all, are well known and not peculiar to such places. The goal has been instead to identify several dominant issues in an attempt to generate further dialogue, and to invite others to share problems they have encountered and the strategies employed to overcome them. Although this article has addressed prisons, the underlying logic of the problems is particularly germane to sociologists delivering sociology to such diverse unconventional clientele as social science interns, police officers, practitioners, isolated students (such as senior citizens or nonambulatory students), or highly specialized groups (law or bilingual students) who may share similar problems that are often concealed. By displaying these shared problems, it may be easier to draw upon the content of sociology as well as its practical potential in a collective effort to overcome them.

The underlying theme of this article has been that in unconventional settings there may exist a potential *irony.* Irony—the heart of a dialectical situation—means that, as Burke (1969: 517) has indicated, "A" goes forth and returns as "non-A," resulting in a type of *peripity*, a sudden shift in the outcome of events. Because the role of education appears to be changing as we close out the century, and because the constituency of college courses may be transformed accordingly, this note reflects an attempt to remind others to remain alert to the *ironic* nature of unconventional settings for the opportunity to transfer ostensible misfortune to pedagogical and practical advantage.

NOTES

1. Unconventional settings include any situation in which the standard techniques employed in campus classrooms are inappropriate because of the nature of the students (for example, police cadets), the structure of the setting (such as an unenclosed teaching area or a tightly monitored arena), or specialized course material (for example, internships).

2. In the institution of this study, there was concern that no funds would be available for the prison college program for 1982-1983, although sufficient resources were ultimately provided to maintain a slightly curtailed program for another year.

3. This discussion derives from ongoing teaching experiences between 1979 and 1982 in a large maximum security prison in Northern Illinois. The education program is administered by the College of Continuing Education of a large state university about 55 miles northwest. The program offers only a bachelor of general studies degree (BGS), which one university program administrator feels is "worthless" and attempts to discourage campus undergraduates from pursuing it. Courses are offered in the prison on an "as available" basis, depending on willingness of professors to participate. Most of the courses offered are from the disciplines of sociology, political science, history, and English. The courses that are the basis of this discussion are primarily sociology and criminal justice. In this institution, 25% of the population have been convicted of murder and roughly half for violent ("class X") felonies, according to IDOC annual reports for 1979.

4. A more subtle problem is the turnover of personnel. At this institution, there have been ten wardens between 1970 and the present and five different directors of the state Department of Corrections in that time (Thomas et al., 1981). Such a high turnover prohibits coherent and consistent institutional policies and especially hurts programs that are relatively low in priority. This is compounded by an exceptionally high turnover in guard staff (estimated by the Illinois John Howard Association at roughly 110% annually, although the current warden has suggested that the current rate is closer to 60%) and a revolving door of underpaid, relatively undereducated persons who receive little "human relations" training and express neither sympathy toward nor empathy for the problems of students (see Jacobs and Grear, 1980).

5. For a fuller description of the social organization and conditions of this institution, see especially Jacobs (1974, 1977), J. Thomas (1982a, 1982b), and Goldin and Thomas (1981).

6. One instructor at the nation's largest maximum security prison experienced a classroom fight between two inmates following a heated discussion in his first class session. Although initially nonplussed and uncertain of his expected role in the incident, he came to suspect later that the affair was "staged" to test his reactions.

7. As this article is written, one of the best students in the class, one nominated for a university award, missed nearly a month of classes because of time spent in the segregation unit and the infirmary for participating in a knife fight.

8. It may seem ironic that prison staff view criminal justice courses with suspicion because of the assumed control orientation of criminal justice. However, most prison personnel who are most visible and directly in contact with students and instructors have not had any college experience. When they have, they do not bother making fine distinctions and see only an "outsider" coming in with "alien" ideas of a perceived "liberal" nature.

9. A friendly critic of this article suggested I include a discussion on the impact of these strategies on administrative perceptions of the instructor and receptivity to the program.

This is difficult. With the exception of but a few highly sympathetic staff, the instructor has avoided direct contact with the administration, communicating as much as possible by letters and through intermediate personnel. Judging from the recent cooperation from the current warden and his staff (both considered fair and competent by most residents and staff alike), the program has considerable credibility. The warden agreed to meet with the campus students of the integrated class (the instructor was not present) and according to participants discussed administrative problems and answered questions with admirable candor. Conversely, some guards who monitor the classroom area while campus students are present are equally candid in their contempt for the experimental program.

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