

Matt Wittstein (00:11):

You are listening to Limed: Teaching with a Twist, a podcast that plays with pedagogy.

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This month we wrap up season two with a refresh episode that takes us back to our very first podcast guest, Lucy Arnold. Lucy rejoins us from season one episode one, "Letters with Incarcerated People," and shares how that experience went for her students and her community partners, including a few lessons learned. Next month, we'll return to our full length episodes and kickoff season three with a guest wanting to be prepared for discourse in the classroom during a big election year. Until then, enjoy this conversation with Lucy and you can find show notes and a link to the original episode on our webpage. I am Matt Wittstein.

(01:13):

Lucy Arnold, it is so great to see you again. You were our first episode on the show and so I'm so happy to be back with you and hear about how your course with letters with incarcerated people went for your honors group. I just want to start there. How did it go?

Lucy Arnold (01:29):

Yeah, thank you so much for having me back again. That class ended up probably being one of the top most influential classes for me as a professor that I've ever taught. I'm still in contact with a lot of the students in the class. A lot of them are still pen paling with their pen pals and lots of them have recruited additional of their friends and family members to become pen pals as well. So I think a lot of your listeners are probably aware that service learning often extends outside of the boundaries of the course. So I do feel like one of the measures of success in this case is the way that this one has really escaped the boundaries of a normal semester and that we're still sort of doing it. I'm also working with some of the students in that class and some of our inside pen pals on maybe writing something. We're still putting it together, but we have a proposal. We're developing publishing something too. So overall, yeah, it was really exciting.

Matt Wittstein (02:25):

That's awesome. And I think one of the things we talked about in the podcast with our panel was just that sometimes these service learning courses end and then the service and connection to the community also ends. It sounds so cool that you had some of your students continuing to engage in this. What did that look like for them? Did you get any feedback from your students?

Lucy Arnold (02:45):

Yeah, I mean, one of the things that we talk about when we were preparing for the project, I told them, I said, the most important thing is to really be transparent with your pen pal. And if you're only going to pen pal with them in this semester because you're in this course, that is okay, but tell them, be frank, I'm a college student and I have all this other stuff going on, and so this is only going to be for the next four months or whatever. But it was really interesting. A lot of them chose to do more than that and they said, Hey, I'm doing this for my class, but I really am interested in you as a person and if we continue to pen pal, that's great with me. And some of them have, we're happy. A few of our inside pen pals have been released, which is great.

(03:25):

Most of them are still incarcerated. What turned out, I think to be most revelatory relief for a lot of the class was just how our inside pen pals were regular people. One of my students who's an artist ended up finding out that her pen pal also did art, and her pen pal actually gave her some advice about drawing upside down to kind of work on her drawing skills and that was really beneficial to her. So that was cool. And then I had another one who we paired her with someone who actually runs a d and d campaign that's Dungeons and Dragons, a role-playing game inside prison, and so he can't get on the internet, so if there are rules updates, she would transcribe them and send them to him so he would have them. He of course loved that and he signed all of his letters to her with Spider and then his real name.

(04:18):

They just ended up having these interactions that were like, oh, these are just regular people and we have things in common, and I think that was really meaningful to everybody. Oh, we also had one of the pen pals who read the books with us. We ended up reading two books in the class. One of them was *Cast* by Isabelle Wilkerson, and then the other one was, *We Do This until We Free Us* by Maryam Kaba, who's a prison abolitionist. And those books were very provocative. We had a lot of amazing discussions about them, but it was really cool. We ended up having one incarcerated pen pal read the books with us. He ordered 'em first thing so he could read along and then somebody, one student's in the class grandmother ended up getting the books and reading along with us. So it was like the class really went outside the boundaries of the class in ways that I didn't expect, but we're really welcome and awesome.

Matt Wittstein (05:06):

It's really cool. I don't think I've ever had an experience where somebody's family members were also reading the content for a course I teach, although maybe, I don't know, maybe they just didn't tell me about it. So on the flip side, I want to know about if you got any feedback from the pen pals or the community partner that you were working with.

Lucy Arnold (05:26):

My community partner was actually pretty thrilled with my group. She previously had mostly partnered with criminal justice students. That is often very fraught. A lot of the criminal justice students, I mean some of them were actively opposed to the project and did not want to do it, and so she had a lot of struggles in other classes that she did this with. And my class was really different from that because I'd say the majority of my class entered into this with a really positive attitude. I'd say at most, maybe a few of them were she had a really positive experience working with my group. I certainly had a couple of students who were less consistent and less engaged in the project than others. It wasn't a hundred percent consistent, but I'd say for the most part, I mean most of my class was really engaged.

(06:13):

I've definitely have heard from a lot of our inside pen pals and they were overwhelmingly positive about my students. The person that I referenced previously who was getting the DD updates, he was just thrilled with that pen pal experience. I've heard from a couple of others who wrote to share their gratitude with having that connection with a student who really listened and asked questions and learned from them. In fact, that was one of my students. I have some of their reflections that I've kept and that they're willing to share working on this publication, but one of my students wrote that she found that her pen pal had more wonder and curiosity than anyone else she's ever met before, which she loved about him of the way. He would just ask lots of questions, and I heard from him after the fact too, and he had those same compliments that she was very curious and that was really meaningful to him. So we overall got really great positive feedback all around.

Matt Wittstein (07:11):

So we've definitely focused a little bit more on the positive side. I'm curious if there were any challenges or lessons learned from this that you might be able to share with other folks considering this type of work?

Lucy Arnold (07:22):

Yeah, I'd say most of our hiccups were probably logistics more than anything else, and this is something that I'm definitely considering for the next time I do this project. I think ideally I would love to be able to have even some kind of pre-preparation for this because you really do need a lot of front loading before you can start the project, but then you feel like you don't have enough time once it gets started. So that's definitely one of the struggles that's I think challenging to overcome. I think if I do it in the honors college, I will have a little bit of help with that because I think we can do a pre-session early in August that will help, I think get it off of the ground a little bit quicker. But that's not possible with all classes obviously. I think, yeah, just the logistics is challenging.

(08:10):

You have to do a lot of training with the students and then we were so careful in the way we paired them, so we wanted to partner them so that they would have the most positive possible experience, and that took me getting to know my students first in order for us to do that pairing process. So yeah, I think the biggest issue is really just the structure of the course and how to make it work in such a short semester. I did spend the first couple of weeks of the class, my students looked at a website, which listeners can check out too. It's a website where they did interviews with people who were incarcerated at a prison in Alabama. So my students actually listened to those interviews and we really did some pre-thinking about it because I wanted them to be thoughtful about what happens in the world.

(08:58):

I shared with them how there's a lot of research on incarceration and how that relates to schooling the school to prison pipeline and how prisons, especially for-profit prisons, will look at third grade reading scores to determine how to plan prisons in 10 and 20 years down the road. When you think about that, that's sort of mind boggling. And in fact, one of my students had an interchange with one of the pen pals about that because her pen pal didn't learn how to read until he was incarcerated. So he was 19 years old and didn't know how to read. He learned to read in prison and he didn't know about that either. So he was astonished. This is actually a quote from one of our inside pen pals who wrote that shocked me too, reading what you said about how they determine the amount of cells they need based on a third grade standardized test that's deep, really deep, just as this can be done to determine the future of a generation, the same thing can be done to reverse the process.

(09:55):

I know I'm going back to positives again, but it was astonishing to me to see the hopefulness on the part of my students and our incarcerated pen pals and their thoughts about how to change and make things different. All of that to say is that front loading is so important, and so making the logistics of the classwork in a short amount of time is always going to continue to be a puzzle to be solved with any class. And I'm thinking if I have to do it in a traditional class next time, I'm probably going to do some online stuff so that we're not just reliant on class time, but have them have an online module to complete for some of it. So that's one of my ideas to try for next time. I'd say the other problem that came up in the course of the semester is sometimes we did have, I think maybe two pen pals who dropped out, just didn't respond for a couple of weeks.

(10:40):

One of them was sick. I mean, she was just sick and we heard from her again I think two weeks later. But my student was really worried about her and we didn't really have a lot of ways to find out what was going on. And then we had another inside pen pal we didn't hear from for three weeks, and it actually turned out he was being moved to a different facility, so that caused a delay. Things like that are unavoidable, right? You're going to have people get sick, people get moved, those things are going to happen. I think maybe what I would do differently next time is just be more upfront with my students like, Hey, this is messy and people are involved, so we don't know how to predict it, and there are things going to be unexpected and make sure that they know that they can talk to me and talk to our community partner about what's going on, which they did. We had lots of discussion and talk about it. I think I probably could have forewarned them that things were going to come up that were unexpected so that they weren't as freaked out about it when it did happen.

Matt Wittstein (11:33):

So it sounds like there were opportunities to unpack both good and some challenging things. How did you handle some of the reflection aspect and unpacking with your students? Did you use any of the recommendations that the panel had a buddy system or reading their letters before they got sent? I know that was a little, Ooh, we don't know if we should do this.

Lucy Arnold (11:52):

They had small groups, so it's kind of the buddy system, but I did it with groups instead of just partners. So they would meet about once a week to sort of talk about what letters they were getting or if they weren't sure how to reply to something, they had a small group they could kind of touch base with. That ended up being really positive because they actually ended up having an easier time writing the letters. And I think that they worried that they would at first, but having their group felt like an additional support system. So that was nice. And in terms of the letters, I invited them to share their letters with me in a Google Doc if they wanted to, but I didn't require it because I tend to trust my students and I tend to trust people, and I understand that sometimes leads to you being let down, but I prefer to operate on a basis of trust.

(12:41):

However, most of them did share their letters with me because they wanted feedback or they just, I don't know. I think some of it, they just feel like as students, they should do that kind of thing. So I did end up reading most of their letters, at least originally before they got into it. Once they got into a flow, all of them were online. We ended up being all the electronic messages. Nobody did it with physical letters, so a lot of them would write back faster than really they wanted me to be checking their work on or whatever. So I mean, lots of them exchanged very frequent messages with their pen pals every couple of days.

Matt Wittstein (13:14):

Sounds like a lot of your students had a really positive experience with that exchange of culture and information and companionship. How did you handle the grading aspect for the course?

Lucy Arnold (13:25):

So of course there were other components in the course. They did an inquiry project, which was a significant part for their grade. But in terms of their service component, they ended up doing a sort of reflection portfolio at the end of the semester, and I asked them in that to share excerpts from some of

their letters. And that, by the way, was communicated with everybody involved in the project at the beginning that the students were doing this as part of a course. So everybody went into it eyes wide open. So they created their own little portfolio sharing what they got out of it and what they learned about it. And I didn't grade it in a traditional way. I graded it more holistically in terms of engagement. Most of them were really engaged with it, and that was what I wanted. I mean, you can't change somebody's mind or heart, but you can ask them to participate in whatever you're doing, and they did. They met that requirement.

Matt Wittstein (14:16):

So my last question is what's next for you? Do you have any other cool ideas that you're starting to pursue? Any other projects that you're working on?

Lucy Arnold (14:23):

Yeah, I mean, I'm a person with a lot of projects. One, if there is anyone listening to this who's interested, I mean, I would love to partner with you to facilitate this kind of work. I'm in process on facilitating this project with some first year writing courses, which I think is a really great spot for this kind of work. They are interested in thinking about writing as an activity and not just as a thing you do for school. I have that group, of course, I've done it with my honors civic engagement spokes before criminal justice people have been involved. I think there's ways to include this in lots of different curricula. So if there's anybody who's interested, I'd love for you to get in touch with me about it. We're still working on writing up something. It's a lot harder when you have so many people to coordinate everything for this article.

(15:09):

It's going to have a massive list of co-writers on it, but we're working on this article as well. I actually have a chapter in a book that's come out just this past month about forging communities in contested spaces and critical media literacy as a social justice practice. So I'm doing a lot of work right now about social justice and online spaces, which has a lot of convergences with this work as well. So yeah, that's what I'm currently up to. I also wanted to invite anyone who's listening who'd be interested in having an inside pen pal yourself to reach out to me. I can connect you with someone who wants to write with someone. I just started pen paling with someone who's incarcerated on death row in Texas. That is heavy, and that's not what everybody wants to do. I am already finding it so worthwhile for me. He's wanting to write a book, and that's something that I can help him with, I think is really meaningful for both of us. Of course, most of our folks are not on death row. There are lots of other options. It is something that you would find meaningful. I would love to connect you with that.

Matt Wittstein (16:18):

Well, Lucy, it was awesome catching up with you. It sounds like your course went really well, and it sounds like you have some cool things in the works that you're getting started and continuing efforts on. So I wish you the best of luck, and thank you so much for sharing with our audience.

Lucy Arnold (16:30):

Thank you so much for having me. I'm really grateful for the experience and for the opportunity for people to hear more about this sort of work

Matt Wittstein (16:57):

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(17:11):

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