Screening Inspiration: From Documentary Film Festivals to Carceral Setting

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ABSTRACT

Documentaries and film festivals embody in a concrete way Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of indignation, of denouncing injustice while also announcing possibilities. This article examines a study on the learning potential of documentary films for nine incarcerated women in a carceral setting who participated in a documentary film and discussion series. The impetus for this project came from a larger study of three documentary film festivals rooted in community development, activism, and social change. Like many attendees at these festivals, participants suggested that they gained information and new perspectives on themselves, others, and social issues. They reported being inspired by stories of adversity and appreciated the films as a form of informal learning. This article also discusses the unique challenges of adapting film showings to a carceral setting, including logistics and access, participant selection, and film selection.

KEYWORDS

Documentary films  
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Given the consistently positive feedback from attendees in Carole Roy’s previous funded qualitative study of three documentary festivals in small towns in different provinces of Canada (World Community Film Festival [WCFF], Courtenay, British Columbia; ReFrame, Peterborough, Ontario; and Antigonish International Film Festival, Antigonish, Nova Scotia), which included 141 attendees participating in a variety of interviews (ninety-four exit interviews, twenty-three in-depth semi-structured individual interviews, and four group interviews with twenty-four people), in an outreach we decided to share some of these documentaries with people in carceral settings.1 As a volunteer-initiated, informal educational activity, between 2010 and 2017, Roy and another colleague showed seventeen documentaries to incarcerated women and three documentaries to incarcerated men. Inspired by the rich discussions after these showings, and as an expression of our practice as adult educators and social justice activists, including McVicar working with a group that advocates for maternal health for incarcerated women, this study examines what we learned behind the bars about the educational promise of documentary film showings and discussions with incarcerated women. We consider some of the unique challenges that coordinating film screenings in a carceral setting entailed, from participant and film selection to the power dynamics between ourselves and the participants and the ways we might approach this work in the future.

Documentary Film Festivals: Inspiring Critical Thinking

As film scholar Aida Vallejo’s excellent chapter on the history of documentary film festivals recently showed, these festivals have become popular around the world.2 It is interesting to note that while Vallejo’s chapter focuses mostly on examples from highly urban settings, the WCFF started in 1991 in Courtenay, British Columbia, Canada, a small rural community of thirty thousand citizens at the time, two years before the first Hotdocs in urban Toronto in 1993, which takes place annually and has become the second largest documentary film festival in the world.3 This may indicate that innovation is not always from urban settings but can also take place in rural areas, even though these efforts remain largely invisible in academic analysis except in the field of community development.

The WCFF has been an annual event for more than thirty years and to its credit has remained grounded in community development and social justice education. The WCFF uses documentaries by independent filmmakers to make connections between local and international development issues as some of the founders were documentary filmmakers and/or community developers who had worked around the world. In the early 2000s, the festival shared its program with other small communities across Canada through its Travelling World Community Film Festival, including Peterborough, Ontario, and Antigonish, Nova Scotia.4 Unlike most film festivals discussed in Vallejo’s chapter, these three documentary film festivals have no corporate funding; instead, working-class organizers developed connections with local organizations and small businesses as sponsors to build their respective audience and to remain closely linked with their local community. For example, the Antigonish International Film Festival in a small rural town of four thousand people had a list of 115 sponsors: the public saw themselves and their interests

1. On Roy’s previous study, see Carole Roy, Documentary Film Festivals: Transformative Learning, Community Building & Solidarity (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016), 13.


3. Ibid. On the WCFF, see https://worldcommunity.ca/film-festival/.

4. Roy, Documentary Film Festivals, 20, 22. On the ReFrame festival, see https://reframefilmfestival.ca/; and on the Antigonish International Film Festival, see https://antigonishfilmfestival.com/.
in the list of sponsors. An additional, and most important, aspect of this community fundraising in Peterborough and Antigonish was to be truly accessible to the public: even though the cost of a festival pass was low (a two-day pass was twenty Canadian dollars for those who were employed and five Canadian dollars for those who were not), they also allowed attendance by donation at the door, although they did not enforce donation and let people in for free, space permitting. These festivals also gave free festival passes to local organizations working with various marginalized groups.

The selected documentaries exposed individual and community struggles for social justice, as well as stories of resilience and actual victories, which, despite their inspiring examples, were rarely, if ever, found in more mainstream media. These were often documentaries featuring what film scholar Dina Iordanova calls “ordinary heroes.” These three festivals belong to what Iordanova refers to as “activist film festivals” as they “engaged in an effort to correct the record … for the benefit of improved public understanding. They are driven by intentionality, be it to increase awareness, to expose, to warn, to prevent and sometimes to change the course of events … [and] they embody the belief that film is powerful enough to have an impact.”

According to Roy, these festivals embodied in a concrete way world-renown Brazilian educational theorist Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of indignation, of denouncing injustice while also announcing possibilities. As Freire explained: “Changing the world implies a dialectic dynamic between denunciation of the dehumanizing situation and the announcing of its being overcome, indeed, of our dream.” A comment by Freirian scholar Daniel Schugurensky also exemplifies the importance of such a forum in the continued development of a democratic society: “Pluralistic citizenship acknowledges that democratic politics must allow for particularities and differences but at the same time must encourage common actions for collective benefit. This ‘unity in diversity’ approach nurtures cross-cultural dialogue and mutual respect … while it fosters joint struggles based on solidarity principles.”

Documentaries from independent filmmakers from diverse regions and cultures allow audiences to gain new perspectives and contribute to creating an atmosphere that normalizes a pluralistic context, where differences of race, culture, religion, sexuality, and language are the norm rather than the exception.

**Democratic Epistemology**

Documentaries and film festivals contribute to building social movements as they represent the process of knowledge democracy, which UNESCO co-chairs in Community Based Research and Social Responsibility in Higher Education Budd L. Hall and Rajesh Tandon define as “an alternative way to understand the place of knowledge at the heart of society.” Hall and Tandon further suggest that the concept of “knowledge democracy” offers “recognition that the creation, representation, and sharing of knowledge must move beyond the more common academic modes of production based on journal articles, conferences and books for academic audiences. Creative approaches to knowledge production and sharing as elaborated by [Darlene E.] Clover and others have been found to be very effective.”

The enthusiastic reactions of attendees, as evidenced by the 141 interviews, spoke to valuable learning and change of perspectives, at times profound, which sometimes included a willingness for greater engagement. A sense of solidarity is key to engagement for social change. Interviewees in the previous study on documentary film festivals even suggested that the film festival in Courtenay helped to prevent burnout for activists.
as they got “a bit of reassurance that they are not alone” and had an opportunity “to recharge their batteries.”\textsuperscript{11} This resonated with film scholar Leshu Torchin’s 2012 report of human rights activist Igor Blažević’s comment that such festivals “are places for renewal of commitment when one sheds the yoke of cynicism by watching empowering stories and mingling with equally committed people.”\textsuperscript{12} While we recognize that documentaries, like all media and print productions, are mediated by filmmakers and authors who often have privileged identities, we also acknowledge that there are those who, although privileged, are committed to exercising critical thinking and paying attention to ethical considerations in order to publicize stories that may otherwise not see dissemination.

The study of the documentary film series in a carceral setting discussed in this article was inspired by the positive feedback reported by film attendees in numerous interviews in a previous study (as mentioned above). Partnership with a retired defense attorney led us to initiate film showings for incarcerated women and men a few times per year between 2010 and 2017. This was a volunteer activity to provide incarcerated people with an educational activity. In the words of Iordanova, “activism takes many shapes and forms.”\textsuperscript{13} Inspired by the insightful conversations after film showings over the years, which could not be written about since it was a volunteer project and not a research project, a study was developed to explore more systematically the learning potential of showing documentary films followed by discussions in a carceral setting.

**Adapting Film Showings to the Carceral Setting**

In 2019, with ethics approval from research ethics boards, we conducted a qualitative case study with a group of incarcerated women in an eastern Canadian correctional facility who met weekly over four weeks for a documentary film screening.\textsuperscript{14} We are required to not specify what type of institution (e.g., provincial jail versus federal prison) and its location in order to protect the confidentiality of participants; however, in this article we use the term “prison” for ease of use. We led a group discussion after each film to reflect and share ideas. In addition to discussions, each woman participated in a one-on-one, semi-structured interview at the end of the four-week series. The experience of taking film showings into the carceral context required adaptation to our conceptualization of the possibilities for films as a tool for learning and growth. Despite the ubiquity of the carceral setting as an institutional fixture in Western neoliberal democracies, citizens are unlikely to have lived experience with them unless they have been directly affected by the justice system. The prison abolitionist and activist Angela Davis spoke to the taken-for-granted nature of prisons, noting that “the prison is present in our lives and, at the same time, it is absent from our lives.”\textsuperscript{15} As adult educators, researchers, and Canadian citizens, we came to this study with a broad understanding of the nature of carceral settings, and previous experiences of showing films in a carceral setting helped us effectively navigate the carceral space to organize the project. Our experience highlighted the logistical requirements and coordination challenges that are different than those involved in organizing traditional film showings.

**Access and Logistics**

An initial consideration for bringing documentary films inside the prison was the question of gaining access. After approval from the university ethics board, formal permission was required by the correctional system for programming by outside organizations. We gained support from
senior corrections staff to conduct our study, which was followed by a nine-month wait for ethics approval from the authority managing research in the correctional system before a meeting could be arranged with senior staff at the specific institution to discuss logistics. Our experience resonated with the academic literature suggesting that gaining entry to prisons to deliver community-led programming can be quite complex. According to research in this area, the very existence of educational programs within prisons can be a highly political and contested subject. Decisions on whether and what programs are approved for delivery within prisons occur within “shifting policy environments” that can change over time. Given the primary security mandate of the prison, educational programs for incarcerated people “can often be seen as a ‘luxury’ and not a ‘right’” by prison administrators. Furthermore, the philosophical differences between prisons and educational community-based programs, which often contrast authoritarian goals with emancipatory ones related to freedom and personal growth, can create tensions and barriers that can affect program design and delivery.

Gaining access, permissions, and clearance to correctional facilities required communication with various correctional staff and, most important, a great deal of time, patience, and persistence. It is common practice for the correctional facilities to screen and approve program-related materials. For our film study, we were also granted permission to bring individual snacks for participants to enjoy during the films. We also provided a detailed list of the materials and recording equipment we would bring, and at each visit we were required to go through typical security procedures for visitors entering a carceral setting. For those wishing to do film showings in prisons, it is important to factor in the planning process time required for approvals and a clear rationale for equipment and materials.

**Participant Selection**

Programs delivered behind bars are subject to review and approval by the correctional facility, and not all elements are within the control of those delivering the programs or those participating in the programs. Correctional facilities are highly structured environments and incarcerated people’s time is organized around their required programming and scheduled activities. In our case, direct access to potential participants was not possible without intermediaries; we had to meet with administrative officials at the institution to discuss the detailed procedures involved in getting access to participants. We were aware of the ethical considerations for this study and its design given participants were incarcerated women, and we recognized a differential in power even more marked than if participants were from the general, non-incarcerated population. The notions of “consent” and “freedom to participate” that we take into consideration when designing qualitative research are problematic when working with vulnerable people who are living behind bars. We were seeking ten participants and had no specific requirements for participation although the institution stated that participants had to be in compliance with their individual carceral plan and approved by the communications officer. Women in a carceral setting have mandatory activities; however, participants were free to participate as they were free to participate in other community-initiated activities taking place at the institution. We clearly stated that potential participants had to be informed of the study before the first activity through an invitation to participate and a signed consent form that were given for dissemination. Although we designed a participant recruitment approach based on expressed interest, we later learned

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that the correctional officer invited participants she thought would be “well-behaved” and would benefit from a film program.

Nine participants attended a weekly film screening over the course of four weeks. We did not gather information on participants’ ages, ethnicity, or educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Given the participant selection process, we did not meet the participants until the initial film showing in the series. Each week included a screening of a documentary film followed by a discussion lasting thirty to forty-five minutes. We facilitated discussion to promote reflection and enable the sharing of ideas. At the end of the four weeks, all women participated in one individual semi-structured interview. We did not have contact with participants beyond these activities. Participants seemed enthusiastic during the film screenings and consistently attended unless there was a scheduling conflict with an important event like a parole hearing, which only happened twice. During the course of the four weeks of film showings, we learned from participants that other women would have liked to participate but were not aware that it was being organized. Although the program officer’s influence on the recruitment of participants was different than the study design, in fact participants told us they appreciated the opportunity to take part in this activity and being invited was highlighted as a positive factor by some. In retrospect, if we were to do this again, we would ask to meet all the women eligible ourselves in order to explain the study and allow perhaps a wider group of women to volunteer and pick participants at random if more women volunteered than we anticipated.

Film Selection

Film selection is an important aspect of a film festival and was crucial to this research study as well. Film festivals and film screenings provide a liminal space outside everyday life that allows attendees an opportunity to reconsider their views. Documentaries that are relevant to an audience’s concerns and/or current social and political issues often foster reflection. Attendees in the previous study, and participants in this study, appreciated documentaries that exposed a problem and showed transformation toward some resolutions; they were interested in tangible examples that portrayed hope as legitimate and change, toward greater justice and peace, as possible. Documentaries are made by filmmakers, often activists, with a specific point of view, and like all print (articles and books) and media productions, they are constructed. However, as Iordanova points out, they play an important role: “film supplies the human face and the story and provides the much-needed narrative background for activist work.”

She refers to a comment by media expert Bruni Burres who suggested that film and post-screening discussions are necessary to communicate human issues and may reach “a broader and more diverse audience than a 200-page report or the legal briefing on these same issues … [as] a great film can emotionally move and affect an individual in a way no legal report can.”

As Iordanova states, “films make the highly abstract categories of human rights discourses easier to grasp and understand.”

In this case, our point of view as programmers also played a role. We chose films that highlighted women who while facing adversity also displayed creativity, courage, or solidarity with others. While we had our points of view, we also had extensive experience as adult educators and activists: collectively we had seen more than a thousand documentaries and organized hundreds of documentary film showings within festivals and in stand-alone screening events. We had also
shown documentaries in carceral settings a few times per year over a period of seven years and had done an in-depth study on three documentary film festivals that took place in working-class towns. Overall, we had carried out no less than 141 interviews with attendees (in addition to interviews with organizers and sponsors) and had worked with a group advocating for maternal health of incarcerated women. This amount of evidence would compare favorably with Torchin’s conclusion based on her discussions with a few “acquaintances” who had attended a film festival and private conversations in which she questioned what they had seen (apparently as outsiders) as “preach[ing] to the converted.” However, Torchin also included a comment by American singer and activist Harry Belafonte pointing out that “if one stops preaching to the choir, they may stop singing.”

23 Seeing concrete examples of individuals or communities facing adversity, analyzing the situation, identifying potential solutions, and organizing effectively to create change can have an impact on our ability to envision solutions and engage in solving problems.

Providing choice at a festival was key to adult learning as it engaged openness and willingness to go on a journey of discovery. However, programming an individual film outside a festival setting is challenging as the film must stand completely on its own excellence. Selecting individual films for screenings in prison was even more challenging. The relevance of the topic, a compelling story that engaged emotions as well as analysis to foster critical thinking, and an arc that showed transformation and resolution in concrete ways were all important considerations in our selection. In addition, we had to ensure that we used films that were in English: women in prison often have literacy issues so subtitles would not be appropriate. Showing films that involved drugs, children, or violence was also inappropriate as they may have triggered past experiences, and we are not therapists and could not be assured that the women would have had timely access to therapeutic support if needed. Providing films that had elements that may be familiar but also introduced new perspectives or ideas was likewise important. Finally, film selection could not be done with input from participants as all materials had to be approved by the institution administrators in advance.

The first film selected for this study highlighted strong women facing challenges with integrity, empowerment, and solidarity. Apache 8 (2011) is about a Navajo women forest firefighter crew who have gained recognition by their peers as being one of the top forest firefighting crews. The Cats of Mirikitani (2006) spoke of the remarkable transformation of an elderly homeless Japanese artist who survived a World War II Japanese internment camp in the United States and later, while living on the streets of New York City, continued to produce art. His paintings are recollections of the trauma he suffered in the camp. As a filmmaker friend invited him in after the damage and destruction following 9/11, over time and with her help he regained his American citizenship and later got his own home. The power of art and friendship to counter trauma are key themes. Trash Dance (2012) follows a respectful and savvy young choreographer who joins sanitation workers in their work for a year and creates a choreographed performance using their mechanical equipment as well as their daily movements to honor the dignity of their labor. Development of authentic relationships and multiple dimensions of identity are central themes in this film. Finally, Humble Beauty: Skid Row Artists (2013) reveals the creation of an art studio for homeless people in Los Angeles. The role of art to support mental health, emotional stability, and, at times, economic survival, is highlighted.
Findings: The Impact of Films

The comments from the nine participants during discussions after viewing the films and individual interviews highlighted the positive impact of documentary films in two critical areas. First, participants were moved by the stories of people showing resilience in the face of adversity, which helped them view their own challenges and circumstances from new perspectives. Second, seeing stories of success and transformation provided hope that they would find new opportunities after serving their sentence.

Adversity and Resilience

Participants were inspired by the hard work, discipline, and perseverance shown by the people in the documentary films. Participants spoke with awe and admiration for the work required by the people depicted in the films, from trash pickers to firefighters, to survive and succeed. Fran commented that “it was inspiring ... just how dedicated they all were, and how hard workers they are.” Claire reflected on “how people struggle in life” when recalling the artists from Skid Row depicted in the film Humble Beauty and expressed admiration for their labor, saying “You gotta do what you gotta do to survive. And that’s what they chose to do.”

Participants drew connections between the level of hard work with the passion and dedication that the people in the films had for their work. They reacted strongly to the singular passion for art depicted in The Cats of Mirikitani. One of Barb’s takeaways from this film was to “Never give up. Keep going. Like, be passionate. Love the things that you’re good at.” Participants recognized that transformation can be driven by dedication that brings meaning and purpose to people’s lives.

They also highlighted the passion, perseverance, and solidarity shown by the female firefighters depicted in Apache 8. For Helen, the firefighters made her consider women’s strength:

> How hard women work. How hard I used to work. It scares me, but, you know, how strong one can be when they set their mind to it and how much one can accomplish, and the strength, how strong one can be. Goes to tell you, the mind is a wonderful thing when you set your mind to it. They were hard workers, determined, better to the men at times, yeah. But very dedicated, great role models.

Fran was similarly inspired, noting that the film was “kind of proving that women can go out and do anything the guys are doing.... It just showed their discipline.” Gina echoed Fran’s sentiment: “Women are good, they’re strong too. And I’m not saying that as a feminist way, but look at what these women can do, right?” These films created opportunities for participants to recognize and be inspired by the efforts and resilience of people in challenging circumstances.

We learned that watching films that involved adversity as well as resiliency, courage, and creativity helped participants view their own challenges in a new light. For some, the films provided the realization that there are other people living in worse conditions than their own. Claire noted that “it could be worse. Some people have it very good and they don’t realize it.... I’ve been through nothing compared to some of the people in there.” Diane reflected on the other women who attended the film screenings and how the films helped them see their own struggles from a broader perspective. She stated: “Thinking of who’s around the table, that it took them away from the ‘woe is me’ and is like, okay, these people had some serious issues and they don’t
These films encouraged a sense of respect and inspiration from seeing others, Iordanova’s “ordinary heroes,” facing challenges with courage and creativity. Seeing documentaries can change the perspective on struggles as a reality of human lives, as opposed to a sign of individual deficiency. This did not negate the systemic nature of problems. For example, during the discussion of Trash Dance, two participants, Claire and Eva, said their partners were garbage pickers and worked hard but they had not realized the importance of their work. These films encouraged a sense of respect and inspiration from seeing others, Iordanova’s “ordinary heroes,” facing challenges with courage and creativity. Seeing documentaries can change the perspective on struggles as a reality of human lives, as opposed to a sign of individual deficiency. This did not negate the systemic nature of problems. For example, during the discussion of Trash Dance, two participants, Claire and Eva, said their partners were garbage pickers and worked hard but they had not realized the importance of their work.

**Providing Hope**

Participants reported that seeing examples of successful transformations offered encouragement that change is possible and allowed them to consider possibilities for life after prison. When discussing The Cats of Mirikitani, many were inspired by the protagonist’s transformation from a homeless artist to someone who, with the support of a friend, is able to come to terms with his painful past and become a community art instructor later in life. Gina observed, “Anything’s possible, look at how far he came.” Claire agreed, responding, “Even at his age, there’s a new beginning.” Barb noted being inspired by stories of people transforming through perseverance, stating, “They’ve worked hard to get where they’re at, so I feel like watching them and learning from them, they kind of maybe helped me understand … there are struggles in life, and to just keep going. Don’t stop.” Alex also expressed being inspired by the hope and transformation shown in the films and linked it back to her own life:

> It’s not a good environment kind of thing to be in, but you make the best of what you got and you just bloom into something beautiful, I guess [laughter]. Overcoming it, and being something that’s worth talking about, telling their story, because it’s good stories, it’s giving people hope, yeah. I like the transition theme because I believe that we are always in transition, regardless of where we’re at, we’re always changing routes and doing other things, and it’s not always the same thing.

Seeing real examples inspired participants and enabled them to see that change is possible regardless of difficult circumstances. Indeed, many participants were inspired by seeing people succeed, or as Gina noted in response to the film Trash Dance, “Average people with average jobs can do great things.” Carla echoed Gina’s observation, stating, “They all overcame adversity and made the best of their situations. That’s inspiring. It gives you hope that if they can do that, anybody can.” Reflecting on the female firefighters in Apache 8, Helen commented on her own abilities: “It just goes to prove, I keep thinking I’m old… Then I saw the first movie Apache and I was like, ‘Wow, if they can do it, I can do it.’”

Participants also recognized the link between the ability to grow and face adversity and having someone who can provide support and opportunity for change. For example, they discussed the impact of the filmmaker in helping the homeless protagonist get off the streets. Helen
noted, "if it wasn’t for that lady, that man probably would have never went [sic] any further in life. So, it goes to prove you, one person can make a difference." Barb agreed, observing that "one act of kindness, and he’s, you know, went from homeless to having a place." Margo reflected on the impact on artists in Humble Beauty when their artwork was displayed in a gallery: "The opportunity has to be there.... If there were more opportunities for art shows, they could get on their feet by selling their work." Seeing “average people” (Gina’s term) living with adversity achieving growth helped participants see that transformation in their own lives was also a possibility.

Participants also shared that the films inspired them to think about the possibilities for their lives after prison. Barb indicated that the films "were very inspiring because you watch people with their struggles and where they got to. And I’m in this place, you know what I mean, I’m going through struggles, you know what I mean, and it’s not the end of my story. Like, there’s more to it." Watching Apache 8 made Helen reconsider some of her reservations about what she is facing upon release from prison:

It gives me energy, watching them. It gives me the need to start getting in physical shape, because the real world is coming, and in August, September you need a new life and you need to find work and, like I said to you during the movies, I’m exhausted watching those girls.... Am I going to make it through an eight-hour day? Am I going to have to start out part time? Am I going to have to start out four days a week? But... but then I see them and I’m going back to my place in minimum, “I can do it!” and excited, here I come, let’s get it out. Yeah, it kind of builds my encouragement that way.

Alex reflected on her own experiences with addiction and how it felt to see the stories of transformation in the documentaries, stating "when you see other people’s success stories it gives you hope, especially being stuck in a circumstance like this.... Maybe seeing it from somebody else’s point of view kind of gives me some hope [laughter]. Yeah. Like maybe I won’t fail.

Seeing stories of success, growth, and transformation in the films helped participants see that even within the adversity of their current circumstances, they are not limited to their adversity and can envision life and growth beyond their time in prison. All participants were highly engaged; they expressed regret that the film showings were ending and stated a strong desire for the film series to continue. However, it was not possible to do so on a regular basis due to distance and a time-consuming long drive.

Group Discussions and Individual Interviews

The richness and fellowship of the post-film group discussions stood in contrast to our experience conducting interviews with each participant after the film series concluded. The objective of the interviews was to provide an opportunity to reflect and share what they had learned from the documentary films, whether they saw any benefits to the film showings, and if they would do anything differently. In a typical research setting, individual interviews are a common data collection method that provides an opportunity for in-depth reflection for participants.
In this study, however, we noticed that most participants seemed nervous and struggled to respond to questions. This was unexpected, as we did not perceive such stress during discussions in the group setting. Upon reflection, however, we attribute this to two potential causes. First, there is support in a group setting, where the free-flowing dialogue provides opportunities to build off the words and ideas of others. Within a group, an individual can contribute to the dialogue by sharing thoughts and ideas, agreeing with a point made by a peer, or using someone’s point to springboard into a different perspective. Smaller contributions are still meaningful and are bolstered by the surrounding dialogue and, in turn, support the movement of the discussion. Within the safety of the group there are multiple ways to contribute, which can create increased comfort and confidence for participants.

In contrast, an interview setting lacked the support of the group, and the onus was on the individual to respond and articulate their ideas. In the interview, there may have been greater inner pressure to perform and the feeling of being put on the spot, which may have triggered past experiences of feeling evaluated and the need to fit a particular standard or expectation. Additionally, within the carceral context we recognize that formal, one-on-one interviews may be strongly associated with unpleasant and stressful scenarios, such as meetings with lawyers or correctional staff. We learned from Barb that she was relieved to discover that the film series would not include tests and that there would be no “right or wrong answers.” We learned that the use of interviews may have reintroduced some of the emotional and structural elements that had negative associations of the prison context and past learning experiences. In the future, we would use a group interview in place of individual interviews, as the group discussion in this context offered more support to participants for deeper reflection on the films, ideas, and change in perspectives.

Conclusion

The prison setting offers an opportunity for facilitated group discussion about the films that may not be possible in all film festival settings. In Roy’s experience organizing and attending film festivals, the most common form of organized conversation following film showings is a question and answer session with the filmmaker(s), where members of the audience are invited to ask questions. The nature of these post-film Q and A sessions is largely dependent on the speaker and attempts to have a broader discussion are often less successful. In our study, as noted above, we facilitated a group discussion following each film. Participants reported a number of benefits of group discussions, including creating an atmosphere of openness that promoted sharing and relationship building among participants. Indeed, the quick succession of four films in four weeks allowed familiarity and trust to build with researchers and among themselves, as we learned that many of them did not know each other before participating in the film series project, and participants became more relaxed and open about their lives in the last weeks.

Participants appreciated documentary films as a form of learning that differed from past experiences with formal schooling. What was perhaps most powerful about documentary films as a learning experience was the absence of the trappings of formal education that could have limited participation. Viewing and discussing films removed literacy challenges and did not involve tests or learning evaluation commonly associated with formal modes of education. Films
Despite carceral settings as sites of restraint, we learned that through films, this space can be transformed into one of expanded perspectives, connection, and hope. Documentary films allowed us to create an atmosphere that enabled the exploration of ideas attempted in community-based film festivals.

Despite the unique challenges and limitations presented by the prison context, our findings suggest that documentary film showings are a valuable means for engagement and learning with incarcerated people. We agree with criminology scholar Cormac Behan who has pointed out that “despite their limitations, dismissing all courses provided by, or within, prison means that some prisoners will miss out on an opportunity to participate in activities that address issues such as addiction that have blighted their lives and led to criminal activity.” As the number of federally sentenced women in Canada continues to rise and the reality that, as of 2021, Indigenous women made up 43 percent of federally sentenced women (despite Indigenous people representing only 4 percent of Canada’s population), we recognize the limitations of individual programs such as those that are less visible and less valued, such as homelessness or the important service provided by trash collectors. In some cases, documentary films challenged assumptions participants held about the film subjects and settings. Film discussions encouraged dialogue and critical thinking on a number of topics and became a shared experience that helped build relationships among participants that continued after the films.

The film screenings enabled participants to temporarily step outside their everyday lives in the prison and offered the opportunity to reconsider their views on various subjects. Participants told us that through these documentaries and discussions they felt, briefly, as though they were no longer incarcerated. They described viewing and discussing films with a group as an escape from worry and anxiety, which allowed them to simply feel “content” and “normal.” These descriptions not only demonstrate how film screenings can create a liminal space for viewers to suspend their everyday reality but also highlight how the prison classroom is itself a liminal space that occupies multiple meanings for the people who inhabit it. Indeed, American scholar on prison studies Kaia Stern describes the prison classroom as “a sacred and liminal space … a territory that is both precious and treacherous for the students and the teacher.” Film screenings created the possibility for learning and growth yet were held within a context designed for surveillance and punishment. Carceral spaces are designed with a specific purpose under the auspices of a mandate that prioritizes security and risk management. As Canadian sociologist Samantha McAleese and criminology professor Jennifer M. Kilty argue, “the prison classroom is not necessarily comprised of the elements required to encourage active participation or sustained enthusiasm for learning.” Despite this potential limitation, we were able to create a learning experience with films that transformed this space into one of expanded perspectives, connection, and hope. Documentary films allowed us to create an atmosphere that enabled the exploration of ideas attempted in community-based film festivals.

Despite carceral settings as sites of restraint, we learned that through films, this space can become a space for altered perspectives that allows envisioning possibility.
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