THE PROGRAM
The Cornell Prison Education Program was established to provide college courses to inmates at a maximum and medium security prisons in upstate New York, and to engage Cornell faculty and students with the vital issue of the country’s transformation into a “prison-industrial complex.”

In the mid-1990s when an act of Congress caused the collapse of taxpayer-funded College programs in most state prisons, a few faculty members undertook to offer a handful of classes on a volunteer basis in Auburn Correctional Facility (a maximum security prison one hour from Ithaca). In 1999, Cornell enabled these college classes to be given for credit, charging neither tuition nor fees.

Credits earned by inmates are transferred from Cornell to Cayuga Community College which is the degree granting institution.

MY COURSE AND MY STUDENTS
I designed and taught an upper division humanities course. My goal was to provide students with an opportunity to discuss crucial issues concerning human nature and social relations. In the tradition of Liberal Arts education and of Cornell’s mission, I believe philosophy and arts are in fact essential to educating students to respect themselves and their fellow human beings.

I had 8 students, who were serving sentences that went from 25 years to life in prison. During the semester, through philosophy (e.g., Kant, Heidegger, Wittgenstein) and literature (e.g., Poe, Kafka, Hawthorne, Hemingway, Joyce, PK Dick) we discussed issues such as:
- Does free will exist?
- Does art exist for art’s sake or does it have a moral value?
- Is it possible to understand people with different world-views?
- What is the defining trait of humanity?
- Is empathy acquired or innate? What about cruelty?

Students were required to:
- Write weekly response papers;
- Take three “take-home” exams;
- Write a philosophical fiction as their final project.

SECURITY PROTOCOLS
Once we arrived at the facility, the other volunteers and I would check for our gate pass. If for any reason someone is not on the list, he or she cannot get in. One week an inmate lit himself on fire and we were not allowed in. The guards treated the “incident” as normal administration.

In order to reach the school area, we are escorted through multiple check points and gates. We walk through the yard. It is empty when we get in. The space is filled by the screams coming from the surrounding cell blocks.

After class, we retrace our steps. The yard is full at this point; inmates are enjoying their free time. They are playing basketball, standing in line for phones, and watching TV. As we walk by, they step back. After class, no contacts are allowed between the inmates and us.

CHALLENGES
I expected challenges in two areas:
- students’ behavior;
- lack of technology in the classroom.

My fears on these issues were not justified. Students were very respectful both towards me and towards each other. We engaged in lively, intense, yet considerate exchanges of ideas. The 2 hours of class would go by incredibly fast even if I could not rely on any technological aid to support my teaching. This was a great surprise, for I have been taught that technology is crucial for the creation of an engaged classroom.

The “zero-technology” of this course led me to rethink my assumptions, and ask the following questions:
- Is technology crucial for teaching?
- Does it enhance learning?
- Does it promote learners’ engagement or does it encourage their apathy and passivity?

REFLECTION
Given the ever increasing number of inmates detained in the United States, it is more crucial than ever to strategize on how to facilitate convicts’ re-entry in society. Prison education programs have been proved to limit the dehumanizing effects of life in prison by providing inmates occasions to practice dialogue and resolve conflicts without resorting to violence.

Prison education does not only improve the daily living conditions of both inmates and prison staff. It also prepares inmates for their re-entry. For this reason, investing in prison education programs equates to investing in society’s future.