

“There’s More That Binds Us Together Than Separates Us”: Exploring the Role of Prison–University Partnerships in Promoting Democratic Dialogue, Transformative Learning Opportunities and Social Citizenship

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Abstract: *In this paper we argue that education—particularly higher education (HE)—has the potential to offer socially, economically and culturally transformative learning opportunities. Yet, for prisoners, the opportunity to engage in HE as active social citizens are often limited. Using a Freirean model of democratic, pedagogic participatory dialogue, we designed a distinctive prison–university partnership in which prison-based learners and undergraduate students studied together. The parallel small-scale ethnographic study, reported here, explored how stereotypes and “othering”—which compromise social citizenship—could be challenged through dialogue and debate. Evidence from this study revealed a positive change in “de-othering” attitudes of participants was achieved. Furthermore, participants reported growth in their sense of empowerment, agency, and autonomy—the cornerstones of social citizenship. Findings from this study contribute further evidence to the developing body of knowledge on the value of partnerships and dialogue in prison education. We conclude that policy makers, and respective institutions, need to work harder to establish prison-university partnerships, thus providing the space for dialogue—“real talk”—to take place.*

Keywords: *Prison–university partnerships, social citizenship, transformative learning, pedagogic participatory dialogue.*

Back in 2017, we contributed to an edited collection of essays and reflective pieces about what those at risk of offending, prisoners and ex-offenders needed to learn (Crane, 2017). Broadly speaking, the contributors—ourselves included—addressed this question with a sense of optimism about the power of education to be socially, culturally and economically transformative, irrespective of the setting within which learning takes place.

That such optimism could exist against the backdrop of a seemingly dysfunctional prison system bedevilled by negative media headlines of increased violence, poor mental health, high rates of reoffending, suicide and self-harm, might be received as counter-intuitive (Allison, 2017; Howgego, 2016; O’Hara, 2017; Syal, 2017; Toynbee, 2017). This is especially pertinent if one accepts that the concept of “prisoners as citizens” has become increasingly contested and the erosion of “rights” in a penal setting are debated—and often, legitimised—in a way that would be inconceivable for the majority of “law abiding” citizens (Easton, 2008, 2013; Scullion, 2018).

Driven by the principle of less eligibility,¹ the contested debate about “what prison is for” renders conversations about “transformative learning” largely at the periphery of policy. Consequently, a model of penalty that perpetuates the “othering” of this socially constructed group and rejects the concept of an assimilated life beyond crime has emerged. This penal model limits opportunities for prisoners to engage as “active social citizens”² either within prison or beyond the prison gate (see e.g., BITC, 2018; Coates, 2016; Murphy et al., 2011).

Prison education is arguably caught in the crossfire of such ideological presuppositions. Whilst prison



education has certainly risen up the policy agenda in recent years, the preoccupation has been with designing an educational framework that engenders positive employment outcomes and economic autonomy (MOJ, 2018). Notwithstanding the resourcing pressures faced by those providing prison education (PLA, 2016, p. 1), we argue the benefits of prison education must go beyond mere employability considerations. Accordingly, prison education can, and should, provide opportunities to promote “social bonds, identities and narratives” that are integral to one’s desistance journey (PLA, 2016, p. 1). One mechanism through which this can be achieved is to work in partnership with other education providers and institutions.

Despite a challenging penal environment, we posit opportunities exist for a paradigm shift in how learning is perceived and provided in prisons, with education provision being constructed in partnership with other education providers to enhance social citizenship, through a pedagogic model of democratic participatory dialogue. Behan (2015, p. 4) argued for prisoner citizenship to be considered around notions of “participation, co-operation, inclusion and potentially, identity transformation”. Accordingly, the primary focus of prison education in relation to citizenship and transformative learning needs to ensure the prison estate provides opportunities for “reconnecting and positively identifying with community and civil society” (Behan, 2015, p. 7).

In considering the current limited opportunities for such connections to take place, we designed a distinctive prison–university partnership³ of learning in which 22 students—10 prison-based learners and 12 undergraduate learners—were recruited to study alongside one another in a prison setting. The 10-week undergraduate-level course adopted a dialogic pedagogy to critically examine the concepts of criminal justice and social justice for social citizenship. Alongside this, we undertook a small-scale ethnographic study, exploring the extent to which the bringing together of different societally constructed groups could promote a demystification of stereotypes and “de-othering” of people whose worlds may not ordinarily collide.

Like Behan (2015, p. 11), we assert that partnerships between prisons and external institutions are critical to removing barriers that “prevent prisoners from contributing to their community while inside and hinder their reintegration into society after their release from prison”. As such, a key focus for this research was to explore the extent to which our educational partnership provided a framework for changing the narrative about prisoners, support social citizenship and in so doing, contribute evidence for a new model for prison education based on a pedagogic model of democratic participatory dialogue.

Literature Review

Social citizenship. Prison climates are inextricably linked to social climates. The interplay between criminal justice policy, public attitudes towards “crime and punishment” and the overarching political economy of the nation state are well documented (see Cavadino, Dignan and Mair, 2013). It is clear that the penal estate can be shaped by the determination—or otherwise—of politicians and wider society to embrace and implement desistance-focused interventions that seeks to break the cycle of othering.

Incarceration, by its very nature, fractures established community relationships and societal bonds. Despite commitment in law (see, for example, House of Lords ruling 1981: UKHL 8), there is a lack of consideration of citizenship and societal “connectedness” in contemporary British penal policy.

Imprisonment not only inhibits an individual’s empowerment and agency, it also fractures important bonds between prisoners and society (see for example, Crewe, 2011; Farmer, 2017; Joliffe and Hedderman, 2012). By not giving due consideration to citizenship, the notion of othering of (ex)prisoners is reinforced, despite strong evidence that pathways to desistance are “through ... relationships—within families, within communities, within the state” (McNeill et al., 2012, p. 10).

We argue that policy should actively seek to understand and redress barriers for prisoners to achieve social, cultural and economic “transformation” and the resultant relationship to identity, agency and personal narratives. This, we contend, can be achieved through the creation of partnerships with stakeholders outside the prison estate – and that education providers have a crucial role to play.

Developing policies that “build the capacity to participate of those who are commonly marginalized” (Scott, 2013, p. 334) presents particular challenges in prison, not least when the prevailing public narrative

endorses a “fear” of the unknown. Allport (1979) proposed that prejudice reduction, social integration and de-othering necessitates bringing different groups together to reduce “in-group” anxiety, and to facilitate a sense of predictability and control. However, penal policy actively undermines prisoners’ status as equal citizens, with communities discouraged from engaging with prisoners in any meaningful way (IPPR, 2016; O’Brien, 2011).

Successful “through the gate” outcomes can be achieved in societies that prioritise the collective “we” rather than “us” and “them” (Cavadino and Dignan, 2006, 2010; Lash and Urry, 1994). Prisoners incarcerated in institutions that adopt such approaches report experiencing more opportunities to protect their citizenship status (Farrall and Calverley, 2006; Lacey, 2008; Pratt 2008a, 2008b;). Similarly Behan (2015, p. 4) argued that “in dealing with the opportunities for prisoners to participate in their community inside and stay connected with society outside”, we need to move away from examining citizenship exclusively in the context of the social contract towards “considering it in the context of the social compact, the connections that bind us together as a society”. It is against this backdrop, that prison education generally—and prison-university partnerships specifically—have an important contribution to make.

Prison education as a site for transformation. As argued above, there is a lack of consensus on the purpose of prisons, and the same can be said for prison education. Indeed, the role, value and purpose of education generally, sits within competing philosophical positions.

Education provides a powerful framework of change for all members of society, being described variously as “transformative”, “life-changing”, empowering (Bourdieu, 1977; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970; Illeris, 2014; Mezirow 1991; Page, 2009). Accordingly, a specific purpose of prison education is for prisoners to become “transformed” by contributing to society economically through employment, and to be aware of their social responsibility as citizens.

The rise of globalisation demands “a more educated and continually [re-] educated workforce” (Jarvis 2007, p. 63) who are appropriately skilled to meet employment requirements. As the majority of prisoners are likely to re-enter mainstream society, government policies for prison education responds to and reaffirms this employment-focussed agenda. In parallel to this economic imperative, authors (for example, Freire, 1996; OECD, 1996; Street, 1995) argue those engaged in learning are better able to participate in, and take responsibility for, their communities as pro-active citizens.

A key challenge for prison education is encouraging prisoners to participate in the education provision, particularly if they feel “forced” to participate or perceive they have little realistic possibilities of obtaining employment in the future. In the absence of economic meaning prisoners may approach educational with some ambivalence (Illeris, 2004).

Furthermore, the societal positioning of prisons and prisoners—their invisibility—leads to a suggestion that providing educational opportunities in prison is largely one of rhetoric rather than a meaningful exercise in supporting rehabilitation and transformation. Indeed, Braggins and Talbot (2003) reviewing educational provision in prisons, concluded that significant cultural changes across the whole prison system were required if meaningful educational outcomes were to be achieved.

Nevertheless, there is a global commitment to the idea: Purposeful prison education can—and should—contribute positively to a prisoner’s rehabilitation and subsequent opportunities to limit recidivism (see, for example, The Council of Europe, 1990; United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners, 2015).

The premise—and funding streams—upon which prison education is offered has a clear agenda; to provide prisoners with opportunities to engage in education that aligns with economic imperatives, within the boundaries of public opinion for prisoner’s ongoing societal positioning (Hodgson and Spours, 1999). Consequently, over recent decades prison education has prioritised supporting prisoners to achieve, as a minimum, a level of education which enhances their employability, i.e. mathematics and literacy capability, and thereby providing increased employment potential post-release (DBIS, 2011; DIUS, 2006; HMGov 2005; HMGov, 2006; MoJ, 2010; SEU, 2002). Accordingly, there has been limited focus in the policy discourse on providing educational opportunities for prisoners linked to a shared societal ambition of social citizenship, or higher-level learning, such as undergraduate degrees. As a result, the potential of prison education to contribute to the

development of positive personal narratives and identity transformation—elements of social citizenship—have been eroded in the current prison education offer.

Recognising individuals with limited education are most likely to become further marginalised and excluded from society, we argue that policy initiatives around prison education should incorporate strategies to develop active social citizenship, as well as economic capability. Such an approach would enable prisoners to become better prepared to participate and contribute fully—socially and economically—in society upon release, breaking cycles of economic disadvantage as well as social exclusion. Despite an ongoing interest in, and commitment to, the provision of education in prisons by repeated governments in England (see, for example: Cameron, 2016; Coates, 2016; DBIS, 2011; Gove, 2015; HM Gov, 2006; HM Gov, 2016), prison education continues to be largely ineffective (Wilshaw 2015), failing either to enhance employability or reduce recidivism. Explanations for such disappointing conclusions include a lack of funding, a lack of prisoner commitment to or interest in prison education, an unimaginative curriculum, and a lack of investment in the prison education workforce.

In an attempt to reimagine prison education, a review was commissioned by the then Minister of Justice, Mr Gove in 2015. The Coates (2016) review of prison education highlighted the perpetual woeful state of prison education in England and Wales, but importantly, provided a “blueprint” for the reinvigoration of provision and delivery of education in prisons for the future. Her 31 recommendations provide a strong argument for education in prisons to be the axis upon which all other activities within a prison are crafted.

Responding to Coates, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ, 2018, p. 3) drafted a detailed reform plan that aimed “to ensure prison [education] can prove to be a pivotal, positive and permanent turning point in their [prisoners] lives”. Establishing a consistent education offer across the prison estate evidences a renewed commitment to ensuring prisoners obtain relevant skills and qualifications for employment upon release. Embedded into this commitment is a recognised need to ensure the offer “responsive to individual’s needs” (MOJ, 2018, p. 5). This provides timely opportunities to ensure the prisoner education curriculum provides space for learning opportunities across all levels, meets economic imperatives but, also importantly we argue, social citizenship imperatives.

Going forward, prison education, and prisoner educators, need to provide learning opportunities that are purposeful (in relation to employment) but are also mindful of social responsibility and citizenship opportunities.

This study sought to explore how a prison-university education partnership could contribute to this agenda. Adopting a critical participatory dialogic philosophy, within a partnership framework, we sought to explore whether social citizenship could be enhanced, social stereotypes challenged or dispelled, and an interest in education for positive self-transformation could be developed, by bringing together two groups who may not generally interact.

The theoretical framework of Freire provides a useful lens for this enquiry. Freire’s philosophy of democratic education through participatory dialogue (1970) provides educators with a radical pedagogic approach to the design, development and delivery of learning opportunities. Describing education as a *system with purpose*, Freire, (1970), argued for educators to be clear of their responsibility when contributing to the provision of education. Arguing that education as a system was inherently dichotomous, he contended that education systems are often constructed to ensure domestication of its citizens—resulting in the reproduction of a social order, within an ongoing domination and oppression of people. He argued for an alternative approach to education—one that could be constructed for the purposes of liberation of its citizens—with a focus on emancipation and freedom, working towards participants recognising their humanity.

Freire (1970) was critical of traditional approaches to learning arguing they provided little more than a process of “banking” knowledge, with little opportunity to understand or make sense of this knowledge. Such oppressive and authoritarian pedagogic approaches attempts to control thinking and action (Freire, 1970) resulting in a “culture of silence” which limits the development of ones consciousness of individuals’ position in, or contribution to, society. He advocated for a critical pedagogic approach to education, based on student-teacher dualism, that enables participants to develop new understandings through a co-construction of knowledge. Such dialogue leads to a space for *critical consciousness* and emancipation. By engaging in

dialogic education individuals are provided with opportunities for freedom from oppression and the agency to enact meaningful change, offering individual hope. Education then, Freire argued, has the potential to liberate people and be transformative—but only if approached in this way (Freire, 1993).

In this study we used Freire's theoretical framework for education both as a pedagogic approach for the delivery of our Learning Together programme, but also as a lens to explore the research findings.

The Learning Together Programme: Prison-University Education Partnership

In bringing two socially constructed groups together in a learning space, our prison–university partnership programme aimed to challenge societal thinking through dialogue—real talk—allowing and encouraging the development of a critical consciousness. We developed the programme with a focus on dialogue, necessitating the construction of relationships between facilitators and learners, and learners from different institutions. The content of our programme—a consideration of the intersections between criminal and social justice—encouraged collaborative working and actively promoting a reconsideration and reframing of one's own agency and power within societal structures. Furthermore, space was provided for participants to reflect on their own capacity to create a new sense of self—offering transformational potential—a critical consciousness. These themes have subsequently been drawn upon for data analysis and discussion of findings.

Methodology

This small-scale, qualitative research project was an ethnographic enquiry into the lived experiences of education for participants of a unique prison-university education partnership: a Learning Together programme. The evidence from this project will add to the growing narrative about the transformative role of partnership education within the penal estate particularly in relation to stereotyping and labelling. By bringing together two, arguably, distinct and diverse groups of students: undergraduate HE students and prison students, we investigated the following research questions:

- To what extent can a shared learning experience challenge societal perceptions of socially constructed groups?
- To what extent can a shared learning experience be transformative, influence identity and (implicitly) notions of “citizenship” and reinvigorate legitimacy?

All participants of the Learning Together programme were invited to participate in the research project that paralleled this programme.

Ethical applications, built on BERA (2011/2018) guidelines, to both the higher education and prison institutions, as well as the national prison ethical committee, were sought and granted.

During the initial introductory session of the Learning Together programme, students from both institutions were provided with detailed information about the research aspect of the course. Following a full briefing and discussion, students could elect to provide informed voluntary consent to participate in a one-to-one semi-structured interview upon completion of the course. However, all students could fully participate in the Learning Together programme, without the necessity to participate in the research project. In total 19 interviews were completed (Her Majesty's Prison (HMP) n. 10, HE n. 9). As recording devices were not permitted within the prison estate, field-notes were taken to document the interviews. The collected data was then coded and analysed thematically.

In order to protect the identity of all research participants, we have applied a simple referencing model to field-notes; this referencing system distinguishes between prison and university students. This was intentional—not to preface one voice over another, but rather to value and give space to all voices in the research. It is important to recognise that the data presented in this article is only a small selection of data.

Findings and Discussion

The findings from this small-scale study are presented thematically in order to explore how prison education could be reimagined through a framework of partnership and critical pedagogy, within a lens of transformativity.

Identity

Illeris (2004, 2014) argued that education provides opportunity for the transformation of one's identity in three distinct ways—"progressive, regressive and restoring and collective". The extent to which respondents reflected on how they felt the Learning Together programme had influenced their identity was demonstrated in the data in distinct ways. The data from this study aligns closely with education offering progressive identity transformation. However, it was evident that for some, education within the penal estate has created a regressive identity, contributing to their current "identity-state".

Participant's described a sense of agency within the learning space, highlighting the value of a dialogic approach to the provision of learning opportunities, and the potential to influence the ways in which different societally constructed social group can be reimagined, indicated in the field notes below:

"LT [Learning Together]—never have an opportunity to speak with people—'education is education' ... great to share platform—'air of normality' to the process of education" (HMP 4) and

"I left with a very different perspective of prison" (HE 10).

A key areas of focus was whether a short programme of learning could challenge how individuals saw themselves and others. The field-notes below highlight how participants reflected on social constructs and how they came to position themselves within them:

"Divide—social barriers; didn't feel like 'good little prisoner'" (HMP 3).

"You sometimes forgot they were in prison at some points in the course ... this was a real surprise to me" (HE 2).

"They're not bad people; just people that have made bad decisions and that is not how they are portrayed in the media" (HE 7).

The data indicates that both groups who inhabited the learning space became increasingly aware of how societal constructs determined not only how they viewed themselves, but also how they saw and positioned themselves within society. There is evidence—in HE 7's comment for example—that there continues to be a reflective ongoing othering of the social groups but also an increased awareness of social citizenship and individual responsibility and accountability.

The reflections are closely associated with the extent to which individuals felt oppressed or empowered within their respective institutions, and the degree to which they were able to develop any sense of freedom, exemplified in the field-notes below:

LT—people from the prison "in power":

The point of LT was for us to learn in a learning space without the "prison" guard watching reminding you—you are prisoners; when students spoke—powerful support, prisons like to remind us—know your place—you are prisoners. (HMP 6)

"LT—felt different to other education courses, open your heart, open your door, feelings, identities, social standing." (HMP 2)

The comments above demonstrate the potential for educational programmes within prison to make positive contributions to transforming how individuals see themselves within society. It is evident that identity is not fixed; engaging with education that provides a space for thinking beyond employability determinants and qualification outcomes, can contribute to a more progressive identity which can support enhanced social and situational consciousness. Whilst employment driven outcomes are important components of prison education, noted in the new MOJ (2018) strategy, there is real value for governors to consider programmes in partnership with communities beyond the prison institution. Such programmes provide opportunities to challenge socially constructed perspectives of each other, and real opportunities for enhanced social citizenship. By involving people from partner institutions who—as future graduates—may well become the employers of the future, the opportunities for de-othering of prisoners as they re-join the employment market cannot be underestimated, nor can its value or capacity to achieve a more inclusive, equal society.

Education

Culture. Educational is largely provided in a society to support its social, cultural and economic growth and prosperity; the provision of education within the penal estate mirrors this ambition to some extent. Prison education is provided within the theme of “purposeful activity” and, as such, sits alongside other activities, for example vocational workshops and employment opportunities. Whilst there is an expectation that all purposeful activities attract a similar “payment”, amounts can differ; thus, influencing whether prisoners chose to engage in educational opportunities. In order for prisoners to participate in some types of purposeful activity, they are required to achieve a minimum level of education. Such criteria can have consequences for the motivation with which prisoners approach education. The majority of education in prisons can be described as ‘formal adult education’ (Rogers, 2003, 2004), largely qualification bearing. The Learning Together project delivered here can be described as “informal adult learning” as there was no accreditation attached to the programme. The value attached to prison education is a further contributing factor to a prisoner’s attendance at, and engagement in, education. If prison education is a peripheral activity in the day-to-day activity of a prison, rather than a “whole institutional” endeavour, the extent to which prisoners are enabled or encouraged to participate can be compromised and what Freire (1970) describes as a “culture of silence” can prevail. Whilst some prisons do provide opportunities for prisoners to undertake paid work for external organisations, the chances for prisoners to undertake any activities in partnership—and alongside—participants from external organisations are rare.

Freire (1970) argued the role given to education by a society highlights the political position of education—as either a tool for liberation or domestication—with all members of society contribute to this positioning, often unknowingly. In designing this Learning Together programme within a Freirean philosophy, we were ambitious to support a liberating pedagogy that principally challenged culture and worked to support “the creation of a culture appropriate to the life of people in control of their work and social world” (Walker, 1980, p. 131), recognising that such a pedagogic approach—enshrined in dialogic theory—can elicit cultural action, offering learning as part of one’s transformative potential.

The data extracts from our Learning Together programme participants, below, highlight their reflections—on prison education, on partnership and on learning alongside others. What is interesting to observe is the cultural assumptions that can be constructed and legitimised through the objectification and labelling of different groups of our society, resulting in the construction of a mythical social ordering and hierarchy.

Our prison learners articulated a thirst for a culture of “normality”—to be able to talk and interact with others; interestingly for our higher education learners, there was reflection on a system that seemed to have lost touch with a key purpose of education as an opportunity for individual, institutional and societal transformation:

“Prison education—‘horse to water’ can’t make those learn who don’t want to; LT education experience—people wanting to learn, share ideas, having opinions, have a space to speak and listen—right to have a view.” (HMP1)

It was a bit depressing to see how the education needs of these guys [prisoners] are often overlooked. How are we ever going to achieve better rehabilitation outcomes if we don't focus on education? I just don't think there's enough focus on rehabilitation. When they do get offered education, it's more to tick a box and to bulk up their files and to say they're more of a low risk. (HE7)

And

Future of prison education—I hope it changes; it needs a massive re-evaluation ... it's just not “fit for purpose”. There're just not the courses available that people are interested in.... I think because people have the attitude of “lock em up and throw away the key” this feeds into how we feel about prisoner education, they don't deserve that. So it's more about mind-sets that it is about money. Hopefully the younger generation can get past this. (HE7)

Power. Education is a powerful political tool—or weapon—within which society can be emancipated or oppressed (Freire, 1970). Through a process of conscious reflection, education can become a space or action for freedom, providing an opportunity to transform one's reality. The data extracts below exemplify the important role learning in partnership can have in illuminating the political power and position of educational opportunities, providing a space for reflection and action:

“LT—gaining an insight into our place in society—wished someone had explained earlier—learning not that much different as anyone else—aspiration to be the same—prison record—just one more hurdle.” (HMP 5)

“Prison education—surprised how little voice they have; resistance to say anything and be *honest*” (HE 10)

Change. One of the key purposes of any education system is to invoke a change. For adult education the purpose of learning opportunities has historically provided chances for inquiry and development, via formal and informal routes. Increasingly in England and Wales the opportunities for prisoners to engage in learning opportunities without associated accreditation has become increasingly limited as evidenced in the policy discourse of the last couple of decades (see for example Coates, 2016; DBIS, 2011; Gove 2015; HMGov 2006; MoJ 2010, 2018; OLASS 2016). The political climate associated with prison education is one dominated by economic imperative, associated with rehabilitation. Indeed, Gove (2015) stated that “education in prisons must be overhauled to reduce re-offending and make prisoner more employable”. Subsequent reviews of prison education (Coates, 2016, MoJ, 2018) highlight the importance of prison education to prisoners' capacity to increase their qualifications, and influence their potential to become employed upon release, thus increasing their likelihood not to reoffend. However, such views of education—and prison education in particular—miss several key points—as highlighted in the comments from our Learning Together students below:

“Open opportunities—doing this LT has made me more interested in course—in what I could do.” (HMP1)

“Officers need to have a better understanding of the value of education.” (HMP 10 [PS])

Education is about learning about yourself – that is how identity change happens. At the same time, I realise that there are other things that are important, but I think that what LT has done is broaden my understanding of what education is.... there should also be flexibility on what prisoners want as well because there's a minority that go into prison very well educated with degrees, so what's the point in them sitting there doing English and Maths?... We should focus on the basics for those who can't read and can't write, and there should be more options for those that are already educated. (HE 4)

“LT—breaking down barriers—participation to tell other people; platform makes you realise you can see prison as a campus—educate or educate yourself. In your mind you are not in prison.” (HMP 4)

The motivation associated with learning must be considered. Without a whole organisational, and societal approach—to the value of learning and its potential, just providing courses delivers only missed opportunities. Learning in partnership and through critical dialogue, creates opportunities for all participants to engage in critical reflection, to become conscious of their own situations: their societal positions; and to reflect on how such perspectives become a lived reality. However, this is not enough. All members of society need

to take some responsibility for creating a more equal society. Key values of the Learning Together partnership were not only to energise participants to embrace learning opportunities through dialogue but to demonstrate how society constructs or limits opportunities, particularly in relation to reintegration of prisoners into mainstream society.

Institutional Considerations

In considering the opportunities for this shared learning experience to be transformative, the role of the institution(s) cannot be overstated. The sociology of prison life has been the focus of much academic interest, particularly in the intervening years since Goffman's (1968) seminal work on institutional living.

Whilst we patently could not remove the prison walls and other physical manifestations of prison life, we were keen to create an environment that talked to Amin's (2002, p.960) "micro-publics of social contact". Accordingly, a critical question was the extent to which the institution promoted—or mitigated—opportunities to "break out of fixed patterns of interaction and learn new ways of being and relating" (Amin, 2002, p. 959).

Powerlessness. From a HE/HMP learner perspective, Learning Together brought sharply into focus the routinized nature of prison life, and how a lack of agency can impact on a prisoner's "moral career" (Goffman, 1968) and opportunities for emancipation (Freire, 1970). Most notably—and despite being a "flagship" learning programme within and beyond the prison—there were several occasions where Learning Together sessions were severely curtailed due to problems with daily movement and/or prison "incidents". As several HE learners noted when reflecting on how the programme had changed their own perceptions of the prison regime:

It [delayed prison movement] just sends out a message that staff don't really care about these guys. Where's the respect ... for their agency and control of their lives? In the prison, it is the smallest things that can mean the most ... time especially. (HE4)

It's just such a shame about how institutionalised they [prisoners] are, so when we couldn't go in for the session, I was really upset about that. And when I spoke to them about that the following week, they were like "it happens"; ... that's their reality. (HE7)

Unfortunately, the Learning Together recruitment process within HMP seemed to reinforce the lack of agency, power and—by implication—citizenship; barriers that prisoners felt daily. One prisoner learner noted that: "Up until the point that you and [teacher] met us in the library a week before, I had absolutely no idea what Learning Together was about" (HMP7).

Conversely, the shared experience of Learning Together seemingly empowered learners and normalised learning, in spite of the institutional barriers and domains of powerlessness identified throughout the research:

"It's [LT] a break from the routine and humanises prisoners a bit more" (HE7).

"[What I liked about] Learning Together was that it was not condescending. [Facilitators and HE learners] spoke to us like human beings and dealt with us like normal. Felt comfortable; felt like going to a normal University" (HMP6).

"When I was doing Learning Together it didn't feel like I was in prison for that day" (HMP8).

Censorship. Coming just three years after the so-called "prison book ban" was overturned by the High Court (BBC, 2015; Prison Reform Trust, 2014), it is appropriate that Learning Together should be con-

sidered in the context of institutional censorship. As the Prison Reform Trust (2014) suggests, any overt manifestation of censorship that goes beyond ordinary day-to-day security considerations, “strike(s) at the heart of the idea of prison as a place of fairness, decency and rehabilitation”. Freire (1970) would no doubt have serious concerns about the way in which censorship perpetuates a “culture of silence”. Accordingly, we were keen to understand how Learning Together was impacted by the broader censorial framework (if at all).

Some context is important here. In dialogue with the prison, it was agreed that for security reasons, two of the ten prison-based learners on Learning Together would be members of prison staff. Despite the sound rationale for this intervention, the inclusion of prison staff in the learning space led to a number of reflections of self-censorship:

It's quite distressing about how many [prisoners] don't seem to have a voice. [prison staff] definitely stifled the conversation at times; I don't think the HMP guys felt they could always express themselves in the way they wanted, because it might go on their file or jeopardise their application for other education courses or whatever.(HE7)

Difficult to voice opinions when prison staff were there. Shot down or told that my opinions were not allowed and that we were “drama queens”. I definitely think we wanted different things from it [LT] than prison staff. (HMP7)

One might speculate how this latter comment aligns with Allport's (1954) assertion that for Intergroup Contact to be meaningful, there needs to be a commitment to common goals and for individuals to come together on the basis of “equal status”. Because the institutional objectives were—perhaps understandably—not always aligned with the learner objectives, it appeared that the presence of prison staff as learners impacted in the engagement with content that talked to the lived experiences of those in the “total institution”.

Despite this, there was a recognition that after the first couple of “introductory sessions” there grew an equality of aspiration between HE and HMP learners:

“The prison needs to do a better job of providing these opportunities, even though it is costly, it is important that we address this” (HE3).

Any barriers between the two groups of students, were quickly broken down. I was really surprised at the openness of the students ...; I felt that they wanted to understand rather than judge. [and] we were all on this journey of understanding together. (HMP3)

Otherring. Closely affiliated to agency, power(lessness) and censorship, are issues of othering. Restrictions on citizenship, agency and autonomy become easier when individuals are de-individualised and “othered” as a homogeneous group.

Whilst there were numerous examples of institutional othering throughout the duration of Learning Together, the most obvious manifestation relates to an incident that took place on the morning of the “celebration event”⁴ whereby HMP learners were informed that—due to security concerns—they would be required to wear green bibs as a way of differentiating them from HE learners. For the whole cohort this request represented an attack on the fundamental ethos of Learning Together (as described earlier). As a consequence, HMP and HE learners threatened to pull out of the celebration event and only after some rather tense dialogue, did the prison rescind their request.

As outlined in the quotes below, the fallout from what was colloquially known by the students as “bibgate” morphed into something more positive; it certainly went some way to reinforcing the bond between learners and a sense that the celebration event had the potential to act as a “status elevation ceremony” (Lofland, 1969 in Maruna et al., 2006). Moreover, it arguably allowed HMP learners a degree of agency and power that they were unfamiliar with in the prison setting:

“The one thing I was really happy about was the solidarity with the bibs” (HE7).

“Bibgate for me was ... a power struggle. After everything we had talked about in Learning Together, we weren't going to be told what to do” (HMP7).

“Bibgate reinforced my view that for the prison the Celebration Event ... was about ‘how can I use this event for publicity and self-aggrandisement?’” (HMP3).

Equally, however, there was a sense that the short-term “victory” might have longer-term consequences:

“Regarding the celebration event and our resistance to wearing the bibs, all I kept thinking was that we're gonna pay for this” (HMP8).

There are clear parallels here with labelling theory (Becker, 1963; Lemert, 1951). In line with Meisenhelder's (1982) observations (Meisenhelder, 1982 in Maruna et al, 2006, p. 273), that “not only must a person accept conventional society in order to go straight, but conventional society must accept that person as well” the value of Learning Together—including the celebration event—is that it appears to play a role in the “de-labelling” process:

“Learning Together was genuinely great because it helped the prisoners see that we valued them as individuals on the same path on the same level in that learning space” (HE10)

That said, we should be careful not to fall into the trap of assuming that the de-labelling impact of Learning Together extends beyond the short-term and “through the gate”. As several LT learners noted:

We go back to our lives, they go back to the same monotony which is to some extent co-ordinated by somebody else. I wonder what they think now; do they think that LT was just a tick box exercise for us? (HE11)

Learning Together took my mind off the outside world; nice bit of escapism Back on the house block, it was the “same old, same old” and you realise that the way that staff treat you and that hasn't caught up. (HMP3)

There was also a strong sense that despite the de-labelling potential of Learning Together, this was unlikely to negate wider populist anti-prisoner sentiment. In line with this thinking, what became apparent was the HMP learners' rejection of any prison “branding” on the Celebration Event Certificate,⁵ with what some saw as a commercialisation of the learning experience:

“We heard a lot of negativity from the lads...I think it was [X] who commented that he didn't want a great big [HMP] stamped on his [*Learning Together*] certificate; they felt that in some way that disadvantaged them” (HE9).

Societal Perceptions and Penal Populism

Othring thrives in environments where stereotypes are perpetuated—and unchallenged—through formal and informal communication channels. Clearly, influencing and re-shaping this narrative is a key concern for anyone interested in penal reform.

HE Perspectives. It is not unreasonable to assume that second year undergraduates—particularly those studying Criminology—would have developed an intellectual resilience to the worst excesses of penal populism (Pratt, 2007). Yet, the research clearly demonstrated that many of these stereotypes persisted prior to Learning Together:

I used to think “they're all criminals, they're all on a holiday camp”, but I've definitely changed my attitude full circle on this. It ... made me realise what it actually means to lose your liberty. Everyone is like “holiday camp”, but imagine having to ask every time you wanted to go to the toilet, or to fill up your drink? Every time there was a setback, they were frustrated ... they were just sat in their cell waiting to go to Learning Together; it's all about their lack of agency. (HE3)

From a HMP learner perspective, the stereotypes were less pronounced, although a common fear to emerge was the pre-conceptions of the HE students:

I had no pre-judgements of the Uni students.... I was more uneasy about being in a room of new people and a fear of being judged and labelled as 'just a guy in prison'. So yeah, it was more about what they were thinking about me and how that would make me feel. (HMP7)

Recognising the power of stereotypes, our underlying philosophy when designing Learning Together was that sessions should be delivered in a way that enabled learners to engage in conversations that encouraged personal insight. The hope was that by the end of the course, both groups would—through a sense of connectedness and co-operation—have a better understanding of one another, which in turn would reduce stigma and prejudice. Moreover, drawing on the Freirean (1970) model of democratic, pedagogic participatory dialogue, there was a recognition about how de-labelling—in spite of penal populism—might help promote emancipation and critical consciousness in the educational setting.

The power of Learning Together is arguably its' potential to deconstruct—and positively reconstruct—"labels" in a way that empowers all of those involved in the learning process. In short, we were keen to explore how education—Learning Together—might help contribute towards influencing the stories we tell ourselves, and ultimately how we might shape society for the better. There was some evidence that aspects of "personal growth" had materialised over the course of the Learning Together programme:

I think it was important for people in prison to realise that they can have conversations as a student, as a human, not as this label of an inmate. I think that they were equal in that room and could be who they wanted to be, say what they wanted to say without it going against them. (HE2)

"I was so surprised about ... how there was much more that bound us together, rather than separated us" (HE4).

Away from the opportunity to challenge one's own individual "confirmation biases" (Plous, 1993) in relation to prison and prisoners, Learning Together also appeared to have provided learners with the intellectual space for wider considerations of penal policy and social justice:

I think [participatory dialogue] has meant that we now know what needs changing and how to change it; it's just whether there is the political will to bring about this change. The biggest problem is that we have all these policy papers and strategies for change and none of it gets put into practice.... And even the HMP students from [x] agreed with that; and they have first-hand knowledge about how none of this stuff gets put into practice. It's like the university saying they were going to make all these changes for students, but they never get around to doing it; imagine what response you'd get from the students? But it's not that bad for students as uni is just a small part of our lives; for these guys in the total institution this is their lives, so any delay or false promises has a massive impact. (HE5)

Cultural "rippling". Whilst attitudinal shifts identified in the previous sub-section are encouraging, it would be naïve to think that Learning Together can—by itself—simultaneously eradicate embedded prejudices and stereotypes and promote unrestricted critical consciousness (Freire, 1970). Interestingly, there was some evidence of institutional bias persisting. As the quote below demonstrates, for some HE learners, there was a belief that the prison hosting their Learning Together experience was unrepresentative of the wider penal estate, and that their experiences were unlikely to be replicated elsewhere:

You can see from walking through the grounds how nice the cell blocks are and how much better this [prison] would be compared to somewhere like Winson Green where you're locked up for 23 hours. So no, there's no comparison. I don't think you could ever do Learning Together in somewhere like Winson Green and I think you'd struggle to get people to apply. I think I'd be on edge the whole time somewhere like that...but then again, maybe that's my own stereotype; I've never been in there. (HE7)

Like others engaging in prison-University partnerships, we recognised that social institutions—particularly prisons and Universities—to some extent reflect social power and wider inequalities. We were keen that Learning Together should transcend these social barriers and in the words of Freire (1970), to provide opportunities for individual hope. The anticipation was that all learners would take their experiences back into their respective institutions and start to shape the conversations amongst peers with regards to education, citizenship, human rights and social/criminal justice. In other words, the hope was that Learning Together would not only transform individuals, but to some extent, institutions as well.

Although this small-scale study did not uncover any notable institutional paradigm shifts, there was some evidence from respondents of a minor “rippling” impact of Learning Together. Principally, this effect was felt most acutely amongst family and friends, but also to some extent back in the prison itself:

At first, [my mum] was a bit worried, but coming on the celebration event and listening to me has changed the way that she thinks.... When she walked in the room [celebration], she didn't realise who was who and I think that she was really interested when she spoke with some of the students we worked with. She was “I'm so glad I came and it has really made me think differently about the prison system”. (HE2)

It's changed me because I feel very much that I want to be more of an advocate, more of a voice for what goes on in prison...I feel passionate about trying to influence a small change wherever I can. (HE10)

“Loads of people asking about it [LT] at work and on the wings. Shared readings with other prisoners. Appetite for other people to be involved” (HMP1).

Ultimately, as one HE learner powerfully commented, the experience of Learning Together has absolutely been transformative—as visualised by Freire (1970)—and that in the final equation:

“it is our generation who have the opportunity to change the way that prisons are run and how we view education in prison” (HE7).

Conclusions

In this paper, we have argued that education opportunities within the penal estate—particularly higher education (HE)—have the potential to offer social, economic and cultural transformation, with positive outcomes for enhanced social citizenship, economic opportunities and, perhaps more importantly, for individual empowerment, agency and autonomy.

The small-scale qualitative, ethnographic study, reported here explored how stereotypes and othering could be deconstructed and subsequently reconstructed through dialogue and debate.

In considering the transformative potential of participating in a HE programme for citizens whose worlds would not ordinarily connect, evidence from this study demonstrates that a positive change in de-othering attitudes, towards and between, those who participated in the programme were established. Overlaying this, there was further evidence of growth in participants' sense of empowerment, agency, and autonomy – cornerstones of social citizenship.

We conclude the paper by arguing that policy-makers, and respective institutions, need to work much harder to establish prison-university partnerships, providing the space for real talk to take place and social citizenship to grow into active citizenship. By promoting better co-operation and understanding between prisoners and “outside communities”, we add to the burgeoning narrative of the transformative role of education within penal settings for social, economic and cultural prosperity.

Through the Learning Together programme, students were both challenged—and able to challenge—the social narrative that prevails around prisoners, and provides opportunities for individual self-reflexivity and agency (Vaughan, 2007).

The findings from this research reveal that by engaging in Learning Together, participants described a sense of freedom—they felt distance from the social institutions they inhabited and were able to explore how the systems contributed to their lived experience. Such experiences, whilst brief, led to a critical consciousness, and provided opportunities—through dialogue—to explore how social groups come to make assumptions and hold beliefs of other groups. Recognising a sense of how stereotypes of groups can be constructed—othering—allows for the process of demystification to commence. Bringing together two often disconnected groups can, we suggest, contribute to a reconstruction of a less judgemental, more equal narrative.

Learning Together when delivered within a Freirean philosophy of critical pedagogy and dialogue has much to offer prison education. However, this programme—and others like it, such as the Inside Out programme (see Davis and Roswell 2013) sits outside the prison education system. Whilst all Learning Together programmes are offered in a partnership arrangement, through prison and university partnerships, very few offer higher education credits, and all are delivered outside of the standard prison education offer. All of the programmes offered to date in England do not, in fact, include prison education staff, and the delivery of prison education has not adopted this pedagogic approach to their delivery. It will be important, going forwards, for governors to embrace Learning Together programmes within a “whole organisational” approach, embedding such opportunities for all those working and living in the penal estate. A new paradigm for prison education in England and Wales is now upon us. Under the new MOJ (2018) strategy governors will have the power to commission education programmes that meet wider societal employment and education ambitions. Learning Together as a programme offers real transformative potential for all those involved.

At a time when penal policy can be considered to be increasingly punitive (seen, for example, in increased sentencing tariffs) and resources increasingly stretched, the provision of education in prisons has been re-examined. The recently published *Education and Employment Strategy* (MOJ, 2018) presents a new era for prison education, which is firmly rooted in a drive to work with prisoners by provide pathways to employment, requiring the development of strong partnerships with employers. The value of any initiative that breaks down the barriers between prisoners and the wider community should not be underestimated. However, such partnerships should similarly be expected for education providers. The findings from this research demonstrate the value of such partnership that, built on a philosophy of critical pedagogy, result in change for all participants—in terms of agency, legitimacy and empowerment.

In creating a vision for the future, we are now taking this opportunity beyond the boundaries of these two institutions and developing opportunities to broaden the scope for such interactions. We aim, using Release on Temporary Licence (ROTL), to take this ideal beyond the gate and into communities in the next stage, and we are looking forward to working with students in the *open* estate.

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Footnotes

¹ Whereby the treatment given to a prisoner should not be greater than that provided for a member of the lowest significant “social class” in free society (Sieh, 1989).

² Although a contested term, in this context, we are defining citizenship as the political, civil and social rights and obligations that play a role in developing and supporting an equality of status in an identified community (Marshall, 1950). These rights by implication have the potential to engender greater human agency and autonomy, whilst concurrently challenging embedded power structures.

³ Learning Together partnerships provide higher education opportunities for people in criminal justice

and HE institutions to study together, and learn with and from each other through dialogue and the sharing of experience (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016).

⁴ As previously mentioned, our *Learning Together* programme was built on the philosophical base of Freire (1996)—participatory and dialogic; and principles of informal adult learning (Rogers, 2003). As such, no formal summative assessment was incorporated into the design of the programme. However, students were invited, as part of the final celebration event, to share and reflect upon the content of the programme through the development of a group presentation, which was delivered to internal/external stakeholders at a final celebration event. The 'graduating' students had the opportunity, not only to present the key aspects of their learning, but also their personal reflections of this innovative and unique project.

⁵ The Learning Together course was neither accredited nor embedded as part of the standard prison education offering and as such the certificate represented the only academic representation of taking part in the programme.

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