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# Literacy, educational policies, arts and prisons

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## Introduction

The dominant international policy discourse in relation to literacy in particular, and lifelong learning in general, assumes that the main purpose of engaging in learning is to increase skills and employability and is based on a human capital approach to education (Biesta, 2006). However, many participants in education are more likely to be motivated by social rather than economic outcomes. For example, Tett and colleagues in their survey of literacy programme participants found that many rated helping their children with their homework or making friends considerably above obtaining employment (Tett et al, 2006). This paper discusses the particular impact that this discourse has in prisons where many prisoners have literacy difficulties (Hurry et al, 2005) and as a consequence are expected to engage in education that is focused on improving their skills.

Prisoners tend to have lower than average attainment and poor experiences of compulsory education (Morgan & Kett, 2003; Muth, 2006) and most adults that have these experiences have negative attitudes to learning and are very resistant to education that is like school (Barton et al; 2007; Belzer, 2004; Maclachlan et al, 2008). A specific study of young prisoners (Hurry et al, 2009) found that provision focused only on skills such as spelling tended to promote little learning and a great deal of resentment. On the other hand, if the learning was more contextualized and active they found that people became engaged and participated in more effective learning. Research also shows that creating an environment where learning operates from a 'strengths', rather than a 'deficit', approach to tuition is the most effective (Crowther et al, 2010). This involves building on and extending the knowledge and skills that people have but this type of approach is very uncommon in prisons (Skills for Scotland, 2009).

## The project

This paper draws on data from a project called *Inspiring Change* that involved a partnership between Creative Scotland, Motherwell College and Learning Centre staff located in prison establishments, five Scottish Prisons, and seven arts organizations that ran a total of 11 distinct projects. Its overall aims were to stimulate prisoners' engagement with learning, improve literacy skills, and demonstrate the potential of the arts to support the process of rehabilitation.

Arts activities often prioritise working together and expect that people will help each other as peers (Palidofsky, 2010). They also draw on participants' knowledge and help them to progress in terms of the distance they have travelled themselves rather

than operating to a pre-set agenda. This means that they do not prioritise a human capital approach but rather look to develop participants' social and cultural capital (Field, 2005). In addition the arts are often an acceptable medium for learning since participants have more positive associations with such activities than formal education (Hurry et al, 2005).

A wide range of data were collected for the project but this paper is based on the analysis of twenty-six prisoner focus groups at an early stage in, and after the completion of, each project. It thus focuses on the perceptions of the participants about the impact of the arts projects on their engagement with learning. In the findings that follow these impacts are illustrated using the prisoners' own words.

## **Findings**

The analysis of the focus group data led to the identification of four themes and these are discussed in turn.

### ***1) Changing negative attitudes to education***

The participants said that school had not provided positive learning experiences for most of them because 'in school you've got too much on your mind and you want to do other things'. Some people now regretted that they had messed about at school, 'when I left school and I lost my job I couldnae go back to school cause I was fighting and all that'. However, many saw that learning in prison offered them second chances and gave a variety of reasons as to why this was the case. One set related to the contrast between school and the education system in prison that had enabled them to learn in ways they wouldn't in the past. For example:

The school system didn't really work for me. [In] the prison system... I've learned more this time than I did the first time in school. I was too disruptive in school ... [and] I just couldn't get the grasp of it at all.

Another set of reasons was about what it was acceptable to do in life outside the prison. For example:

When [you] come into prison, everybody's the same and it's no big deal learning how to read and write. ... Whereas outside, when they've got all the money, the fancy cars, the power, the respect, the last thing they're going to want is to turn around and say to somebody is, "Oh, I'm going to night school to learn how to read and write." [In prison] you try to better yourself and it's not frowned upon whereas outside it would be ... because everybody likes to think that they're big time outside.

The availability of time in prison was also cited as an advantage 'because [education] gets you thinking about what you want to do'. The difficulties in getting tuition because of the embarrassment of people thinking you were 'a daftie' were acknowledged but it was suggested that 'if you offered some kind of clear path with incentives where you start from nothing and there's an easy first step you can take, which got you started on a process', then people were more likely to engage.

Many prisoners reported that accessing education was not that easy as there were delays in getting into the more popular classes, especially in the arts, and discontinuities where subjects they had enjoyed or wanted to develop to a more advanced stage simply disappeared. Some were also concerned about the timing of classes since 'if you go one day and then wait a full week to go back again ... it's like starting over again'. Others pointed out that the emphasis on reading and writing in prison meant that 'the whole spectrum of different academic levels [isn't] really addressed'.

## **2) Building an active learning culture**

Another aspect of changing negative attitudes to education is to build an active learning culture where a balanced programme of opportunities is available (Skills for Scotland, 2009). Several participants thought that the project was well named as it was 'inspiring us and trying to see that maybe we've got hidden talents we don't know anything about' and the project also enabled people to see what they were good at and so opened up prospects for the future.

Participating in the Inspire projects motivated participants to improve their skills through providing engaging and challenging activities. Prisoners said that the arts projects showed 'that we're good at something'. They also suggested that participating:

gives you extra skills ...it can open your eyes and you say [to yourself] "I didn't know I could do that before I came here" and it turns out I can and I'm quite good at it.

This shows the value of enabling people to learn in the ways that suit them and it also means that 'It really doesn't matter what your ability is. It's about the guys having their say, irrespective of...if your grammar is accurate or not'. These examples demonstrate that the arts can provide opportunities for learning, but the way in which learning was presented had to be acceptable to the dominant culture. For example:

some people didn't want to go [to x project] because they don't want to appear stupid so they'd rather say, "I'm not doing it." Rather than give it a try.

Engaging in the arts could be more acceptable, however, than other educational activities.

I think [art] is important because people can express themselves. See, for someone to express themselves in words, sometimes can be [difficult]... say someone is sad and all that, especially in a macho environment like this. ...Lads could say, ..."Get a grip on yourself." Where you can paint something and it can say the same thing.

Participating in projects also motivated people to give it a go, for example 'I'm not the best at reading and writing but there's no spelling involved [so I'll] give it a bash and see how it goes'

### **3) Enabling people to work to their strengths in collaboration with their peers.**

Building on and extending the knowledge and skills that prisoners' already have and helping them to progress was important. An aspect of this was enthusiastic and encouraging staff that helped because 'if you've got somebody encouraging you to say you can do these things, you're not the bottom of the rung. You are able to do something'. Participants in most of the projects also got lots of feedback and this helped them 'to move on to the next achievement'. They also learnt that they had new talents and that they could build on what they had already done. 'I learnt that if I actually put my mind to it I can do a story and put pictures to it'.

Another aspect of the projects was that they enabled better communication by creating opportunities for interaction since 'you very rarely get to speak to anybody'. Once people learned to express themselves a bit better then they could use a wider range of emotions and 'let myself go a bit'. Nearly all the Inspire projects involved people in working together so that the more withdrawn participants were brought out of their shell. It also meant that 'the guy that sits at the back of the class and never says anything... [gets] the chance to get his ideas across as well because in prison, to put your point across you've got to be pretty confident'.

The arts interventions were particularly effective in encouraging participants to develop their own ideas, although some people found this difficult at first. In the end, however, this led to a much greater involvement because:

It's our project isn't it? The guy's showing us how to go about it and how to do it, but it's us that is actually coming up with the story, coming up with the characters... with this group they're saying, you can be capable. They're not just saying, "you do this, you do that." It's down to us where we want to go and what we want to do with it.

Working in this way meant that 'you had to use your head' and work out what you wanted to do yourself rather than being told what to do. The artists 'wanted to see what we were coming up with [and] to use our own [ideas]' and this meant participants took more responsibility for the work than they would have done if it had been more structured. They were also encouraged to do things differently and take a few risks that meant that they made progress because 'if you only stick to what you know you're never going to achieve anything'.

As well as a focus on individual achievement prisoners worked together and supported each other because they had an overall goal. This meant that they were putting all their different ideas together and learning from each other particularly if 'you ran out of ideas'. The artists were particularly effective because 'they teach you to work together, to be creative and enthusiastic'. Working together also involved

people being aware of their own abilities and taking a back seat if that would help to encourage others. For example: 'I know my grammar is good enough to write and I have reasonable ideas but [if someone] is struggling my... responsibility is to shut up and give him a chance'.

Positive action to support each other was also apparent either through help with specific skills, such as writing clearly, or in terms of building people's confidence. For example:

I had to keep telling x that he could do it and it was sounding good. And sometimes when he wasn't saying, "Listen, you're a bit nervous. You gotta relax".

Prisoners also helped each other to 'just keep going' when projects got difficult and their motivation dipped or they were too stressed to think clearly. In addition the way that many of the projects were set up meant that everyone had to work together and this emphasised the group effort and the importance of being able to rely on each other to do their fair share. Working together meant that 'the people you were doing it with became part of your family and kept you going'.

#### **4) Increasing confidence and self-esteem**

Across the whole prisons' estate people spoke about how participating in Inspire had developed their confidence. Most referred to the psychological aspects of confidence that related to their growing sense of their potential and ability to achieve. This took a number of forms. One aspect was to do with others believing in you and seeming to care about what you did. For example, 'when people come in and make you feel you're worth something...it just builds up your self-esteem seeing people generally care'. Part of this was about being given a chance by those whose opinions you value; especially when participants felt that they were normally judged as people that 'should be thrown on the scrap-heap'.

As well as gaining confidence from others' positive assessment of the work that had been done participants also reported that they had become more able to judge their own work 'knowing that you done a good thing'. This feeling was often contrasted with their prior experience of not doing well and being judged as failures. One aspect of being able to make these judgements was about the intensity of the projects they had been engaged in, which had been so absorbing that they had forgotten their usual anxieties and this in turn had increased their self-esteem.

The projects that had involved working as a team also built confidence because every person mattered and had to participate and this led to 'better self-esteem'. This experience also transferred to other parts of the prisoners' lives, for example, giving confidence 'to actually participate in working with groups instead of just as an individual' and to 'learn to trust others'. For some too it helped to bring 'back good memories from the past' and these good feelings in turn built confidence to participate in other learning activities.

Participants reported that when they had engaged effectively it opened up 'other prospects for us... and shows that we've got other skills'. Discovering these skills in turn led to being 'more focused' and could help people to 'break away their shell' and so open themselves up to other possibilities. These possibilities were linked to increasing abilities, and the positive feelings these generated made offenders 'want to do good in here' and could 'bring a better side out of you'.

A final aspect of the ways in which Inspire had built confidence and increased self-esteem was the positive impact of the public performances. Several things contributed to this. One was the ability for offenders to link to their families and do something that was 'going to make them proud'. Another was being able to give people outside 'inspiration' and a final one was the impact on their fellow prisoners who were 'genuinely jealous'.

## **Discussion**

How have these arts-based projects in prisons challenged the dominant human capital discourse? One way is through the pedagogical approaches used that have encouraged personal and social development rather than focusing on building narrow skills. This is because the participants' negative perceptions and experience of organized education have been challenged through the creation of an environment where learning can take place in a positive way that builds on and develops people's existing strengths (Rogers, 2003). In addition supportive relationships between tutors and learners and amongst peers have been developed where expertise and support are offered within reciprocal relationships through exchanges of skills and knowledge. Research shows that this approach is highly effective in building social and cultural capital (Crowther et al, 2010). A further positive pedagogic approach was using peer mentors to encourage each other to recognize and address their own needs in a supportive way.

Another way in which participation in these arts activities represents a more appropriate form of learning is because adults have 'spiky' literacies skills profiles, with areas of strength and weakness according to how, where and when they need to use these skills (St. Clair et al, 2010). For example, participants were able to read song lyrics because these were important to them but found reading a novel difficult because it was not relevant to their lives. Again the range of activities that participating in the Arts develops enables adults to work to their strengths and reach the outcomes that they see as desirable. This also means that it is the distance travelled by individuals that is the key measure of impact rather than pre-defined changes in the narrowest skills aspects of reading and writing.

More widely it is clear that participating in the arts projects has built an active learning culture and motivated participants to engage in learning in ways that suited them and encouraged them to achieve their goals. Learning built on the participants' strengths both in terms of the arts and also in improving the verbal and written skills that were embedded in the work for the projects. As a result participants learned to

work together more effectively and were more trusting and supportive of each other. Participating also built confidence through participants' growing sense of their potential and ability to achieve. This was the result of both outsiders believing in them and an increase in their own abilities to judge themselves more positively. Growing confidence led to an increase in other skills and a willingness to be open to possibilities that had not been considered before.

This project has clearly achieved its objectives and engaged prisoners in effective and motivating learning. However, it was a pilot project that operated for a short period and it is not yet possible to evaluate its longer-term impact. It also has to be set in the context of the more normal prison environment where an inspection of prisons pointed out that 'in most cases prison literature and arrangements to promote learning were unimaginative and not presented in a style to attract and encourage participation' (HMle, 2010 p.34). So although this project has challenged the dominant human capital discourse it is very unlikely that these new ways of working can be embedded into the wider prison culture. What is more probable is that the much narrower discourse that focuses on skills for employability will continue to dominate.

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