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“In & out”
Autobiography as an instrument for re-planning in consequence of an imprisonment experience

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Abstract

The aim of this study is predisposing an autobiographical activity inside penitentiaries for promoting and encouraging the reconsideration of one’s own past and re-planning one’s future “beyond the bars”. In imprisonment circumstances writing has ever been a way of understanding oneself, voicing hopes and desires, acquiring awareness of passing time, reflecting on one’s own past and imagining a new, different life. In penitentiaries writing therefore represents a creative activity which helps to survive and pursue a space for freedom. It becomes an instrument for discovering new “worlds” and new ways of self-expression¹. Starting from this premise, this study aims to “collect” the experiences of those detainees who, through narrations of their own life, work, suffering and imprisonment occurrences, try and want to find new perspectives and opportunities for their future. These above-mentioned ”worlds”, these extracts of existence, will be collected and illustrated by the means of narration, epistolary correspondence, poetry, and photography, among others. The results of each autobiographical workshop, that means a synthesis of all the materials produced on both paper and multimedia supports (CD Rom, video and so on), will be divulged to all the penitentiaries involved in this research and published on the web.

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1 Problem Statement

Low self-esteem, lack of trust and the isolation of the prison cell make people more and more solitary. Getting these participants to open up and tell – or write – about themselves has not always been easy. Asking them to participate, share and communicate about it has even been tougher. We feel that a prison writing course, the linguistic approach, is all about gaining trust and gaining someone’s trust is something that comes with time. We feel that – in order to still improve the impact – each course would probably have to be more intense and longer which would grant the teacher more time to gain acceptance and trust.

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2  PURPOSE OF STUDY
The aim of the project is to make prisoners look back, encourage them to reflect about their past and at the same
time prepare them to re-plan their future “beyond bars” by making them write. Writing helps you explore and
express your inner self, it also helps you to remember memories and it allows you to sort out your thoughts and feelings. These written pieces incorporate feelings as well as facts, and the authors’ own insights are an important part of the finished essays. The therapeutic value is life-changing for the prisoners, most of them have never experienced anything like this. Their expression and experience is suddenly being valued. They suddenly realize that they can and should pay attention to their own feelings and their own thoughts.
This project also aims at encouraging prisoners to enjoy this creative writing and be stimulated by collaborating, by
listening to and learning from each other. The fruits of their writing often contain similar elements, ranging from frustration and fear to delight and intense creation. The writing of one’s own reminiscence, and having written these up and published, has a power and impact which is greater than just telling. Prison writing helps prisoners to understand themselves, to voice their hopes and desires, to reflect on one’s own past and future life “beyond bars”. They are also stimulated to open up and share their writings with others. They listen, learn and communicate about it. Next to the socio-psychological aim, there is also the linguistic approach. Writing – for some in their mother tongue and for others in a foreign language - is an avenue through which the “healing process” begins. Something inside is unleashed and a creative literary embryo develops into a “competent” narrative. Sad memories and a hint of optimism are often combined to turn melancholy into joy and productivity, showing the restorative and rehabilitative power of writing.
The results of each autobiographical workshop is disseminated to all penitentiaries involved in the project and
published on the web.

3  STUDY METHODS
3.1  The target groups
The participants are all inmates in three prisons in Belgium, namely in the cities of Turnhout, Merksplas and Wortel. They are mother tongue speakers and second language speakers of Dutch.

3.2  Examples of the course syllabus
3.1.1 Write a text about you and your family.
The following questions might help you to write about you and your family
- Do you have a small or a large family ?
- How many brothers, sisters, cousins do you have ?
- Did your family live far away or close by ?
- Did you see you grandparents regularly ?
- Was there anyone you had a special bond with ?
- Who did you live with ?
- Did you grow up in a village or in a city ?
- Where did you play ?
- Who did you play with ?
- When did you have feasts and parties ?
- Who did you celebrate these with ?
- What were the parties or celebrations like ?
- Was there anyone you looked up to when you were young ?
- Did you have a happy childhood ?

3.2.2 Now write a text using the answers to the following questions
- Which education did you receive ?
- Was it a good education for you ?
- Are you in training now ?
- Are there any other things you would like to learn?
- Which jobs have you done?
- Do you have a dream job?
- Is this job realizable for you? Why (not)?

### 3.3 The classes

The inmates were invited to come to these writing classes. Here we worked closely together with the judicial social workers in prison. Our language teachers guide the inmates through several chapters of the writing course. Each chapter focuses on one specific aspect of the inmate’s life:

1. Me and my family
2. My job and my education
3. Friendship
4. Character and emotions
5. Life behind bars

Each chapter starts with an introduction, a group discussion which should make the participants think about the subject and talk about it, share thoughts and feelings. Then the teacher goes through the example texts in the course so that the participants know exactly what is expected from them. In order to get them started, the participants get sets of questions. The answers to these questions should help them write their own text. The texts and essays are corrected by the language teachers and afterwards the corrections are talked through with the participants. Finally the Dutch texts and essays are translated into English and put on a CD.

### 4 FINDINGS

#### 4.1 Examples of writing pieces of the inmates

**4.1.1 Adrian. Hello my little son**

How are you? And what about school? Mum told me that you are a good, calm boy and that you study well. I am happy. On the phone yesterday, you told me about the pyramids and I promised to write you a letter about this. Today, I would like to give you a little lesson about the pyramids. The pyramids are very old. The pharaohs, the kings of Egypt, are buried there. If a pharaoh died, he was buried - with part of his treasure - inside the pyramid which had been built for him during his life. Until today it remains a big mystery, these pyramids are colossal and everything was manual work without cranes and machines. Cheops is the largest pyramid but I am not sure how high it is. Perhaps you can look this up?! The archaeologists, these people study antiquity, have discovered some of the pyramids, they are antique hunters. This is enough for you, you can learn the rest in school.

When you have grown up, you can make a trip to Egypt. You have to see this “live”, it is a very tourist country. See you soon! TATI (dad in Romanian)

**4.1.2 Corneel. Life behind bars**

Yes, it is an unusual life. I had never thought I would end up there. I was already 29 years old when I was put behind bars for the first time. Until then I had barely had any problems or traffic offences. Meanwhile, I have already started my fifth year here. The years go by very quickly. I cannot deny that – in some way – this was good. Everybody should go through this once. It gives you the time to think about yourself, your life and your future, about what went wrong.

One of the most difficult parts for me was, learning to live together with other people, races and cultures. I have tried to use my free time in a useful and effective way. In the beginning I worked a lot but now, the last two years, I prefer lessons and projects. I find more quality of life there. Yes, I have already gathered about fifteen diplomas and certificates.

If I ever get out, they will never see me again here. A bad hotel: much too expensive, I don’t get a key, no room service, no service at all and the door doesn’t even have a handle on the inside.

When I get out of here - and that won’t take long anymore – I will first take a nice, long and hot bath or a sauna. I am also going to enjoy the small things life has to offer: an open window without bars, swimming, taking a walk in the forest or go shopping.
Apart from that, I would like to keep on studying: psychology or drama school and printing. Because of the difficult economic times we go through now, it will be hard for an ex-convict to find work, so I will wait for better times a little. In the meantime, I will study and enjoy myself.

4.1.3 Giorgio. A letter to a friend
Hey Jean, It has been a while since we have been in touch. That is why I am sending you this letter. How are you doing, Jean?
For the moment I am kept under restraint which will remain like this for a while. I am taking courses, about 17 hours a week. I have just started a training course FIRST AID which is always useful when you love people.
If they give me the chance to come to my senses again, I want to go for a family life. Don’t you ever think about that? Or are you happy with the way things are today?
Greetings, Your cousin Giorgio

4.2 Discussions
The potential value and success of this linguistic writing therapy can be appreciated from participant feedback. Some of the reactions of inmates who participated:
One commented that he had to structurize and organize, he had to act rationally and confront things without rambling and fighting.
Another one said he had been working on his texts so intensively that now he was less likely to forget his stories versus forgetting what he had said the week before.
Still another felt this project made him reread, revive and analyze his thoughts and feelings again. This is what therapeutic writing is all about: remembering and understanding, processing and accepting... and getting ready for this new start.
Another one reacted saying that writing down his feelings, thoughts and stories did not only help himself but it also made it possible for him to share these with his family and friends. It helped them to understand him better.
There are often strong emotions expressed, including grief, anger and fear, although some have a lighter and even humourous touch.
We believe that this project contributes to the social (re)inclusion of prisoners. Through this therapeutic writing – retrospection, reviving, rethinking and putting their thoughts, feelings and stories on paper – the inmate has gone through it all again, to understand, evaluate and process things better.
The participants have been able to share their writings with others, they have been able to talk about things, to communicate. They are proud about their texts – which also have been translated – which are “published” on the internet. They have accomplished something, their self-esteem has boosted.
Not only have they been able to word their feelings which can be an avenue through which the “healing process” begins. They have been able to improve their language skills which will help them to express themselves better, to communicate, socialize and which will facilitate their social inclusion process.

5 CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Important processes, partnerships and dissemination
We have closely worked together with two external partners: the prision authorities, the prison social workers and the local justice authorities. We started up in one local prison in Merksplas here and then – because of the success – we extended the project and also started up in the prisons of Turnhout and Wortel. We do have a lot of experience teaching NT2 – Dutch second language teaching – on our campus. That is why we initially started the project as a prison writing NT2-project. But very soon – because of the demand - we extended the project to also NT1, with mother tongue speakers of Dutch.
The essays and texts have been translated into English and published on a internal webtool. The results of the project are divulged and share with our European partners. Next to that, our school has also been presenting the results at several meetings and educational fairs and dissemination activities

5.2 Contributing to social inclusion and the impact for the participating organisations and the target group
Writing does not only keep you company when isolated from everyday contact, it also enables you to express your feelings when those around you cannot. It can even help you to reach for the stars. The therapeutic value is often really life-changing for these prisoners. Their expression and experience is suddenly being valued. A new nuanced world opens up for them. Often an unknown world for them... for quite some time anyway. The project makes them realize that they can and should pay attention to their own feelings and their own thoughts. They are encouraged to enjoy writing process and they are stimulated by collaborating, by listening to each other. They are also encouraged to express themselves. The fruits of their writing often contain similar elements, ranging from frustration, fear and anger to delight and intense creativity.

Prison writing is an avenue for isolated inmates through which healing begins for them. Something inside is unleashed, as a creative literary embryo develops and is born. Painful memories and a dash of optimism can turn melancholy into joy, creativity and productivity. The essays are meant to incorporate feelings as well as facts, and the authors' own insights are perhaps more important than the finished essay.

REFERENCES