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Special Edition
**The Transformational Potential
of Prison Education**

Educational Partnerships Between Universities and Prisons:

How Learning Together can be Individually, Socially and Institutionally Transformative

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Prisons and universities are both institutions that seek to play a part in being individually and socially transformative. According to HM Prison Service's mission statement, prisons seek to help prisoners 'lead law-abiding and useful lives in custody and after release'. The vision of the National Offender Management Service is to 'work collaboratively with providers and partners to achieve a transformed justice system to make communities safer, prevent victims and cut crime'.² University mission statements also reflect aspirations to be individually transformative by providing spaces within which people can pursue excellence through learning. They seek to contribute to society by making learning opportunities inclusive³ and by producing research that helps us to make sense of the world and how we might shape it for the better. Prisons and universities both seek to capacitate and invest in people, recognising that social transformation is achieved through individual growth.

There is a long British history of people in universities and prisons learning alongside one another. As a field of inquiry, criminology is steeped in the benefits of interactive learning between people actively involved in the criminal justice system and people engaged in the system from an academic perspective. In the 1950s, Professor Max Grunhut, one of the founding fathers of academic criminology, set up and ran a society called 'Crime-a-Challenge'. Among other things, this society regularly brought boys who were serving sentences at Huntercombe Borstal to have tea with boys studying law in Oxford. Professor Nigel Walker organised dialogue groups where he took students from Oxford and, later, from Cambridge into local prisons. These meetings were not used as avenues through which to reform prisoners, but rather as a basis from which Walker and his students could learn *from* and *with* people in prison.⁴ Other similarly oriented initiatives grew from these roots.⁵

While opportunities for learning between criminal justice practitioners and universities have increased,⁶

1. We are grateful for the many conversations with our students and colleagues, both in and out of prison, which have informed our thinking in designing, delivering and understanding Learning Together. Particular thanks are owed to our CRASSH Faculty Research Group Co-Convenors, Jo-Anne Dillabough and Michelle Ellefson, the University of Cambridge's Teaching and Learning Innovation fund, Jamie Bennett, Andy Woodley and Sharon von Holtz of HMP Grendon, and the British Academy for funding to evaluate Learning Together over the next five years.
2. National Offender Management Service Business Plan 2014-15: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/302776/NOMS_Business_Plan_201415.pdf.
3. Although all universities are formally committed to equality of opportunity irrespective of socio-economic background, many universities do not realise their aspirations in practice. See further Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission 'Higher Education: The Fair Access Challenge' (June 2013), p.2: 'This evidence shows that some of our leading universities in particular have a long way to go: they have become more, not less, socially unrepresentative over time. The proportion of students at these institutions from state schools and from disadvantaged backgrounds is lower than it was a decade ago.': https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/206994/FINAL_Higher_Education_-_The_Fair_Access_Challenge.pdf. The Government seeks to double university admissions from people from disadvantaged backgrounds by 2020 compared with 2009 and increase BME student admissions by 20%. See further Department for Business Innovation and Skills 'Fulfilling Our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice' (November 2015), p.13: https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/474227/BIS-15-623-fulfilling-our-potential-teaching-excellence-social-mobility-and-student-choice.pdf.
4. Walker, N. (2003) *A Man Without Loyalties: A Penologist's Afterthoughts*, Barry Rose Law Publishers Ltd: Chichester, p.124.
5. Andrew Rutherford, for example, ran similar initiatives at young offender institutes in the North East of England.
6. Examples of strong learning relationships between criminal justice practitioners and universities include the MST in Applied Penology, Criminology and Management at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, the Professional Doctorate in Criminal Justice at the University of Portsmouth and the LLM/MSc in Criminal Justice and Penal Change at the University of Strathclyde. Other organisations, such as the Butler Trust, promote dialogue between criminal justice practitioners and university communities. See, for example, 'Putting Research into Practice': <http://www.butlertrust.org.uk/putting-research-into-practice/>.

opportunities for mutual learning between students (incarcerated and not) are rare. In contrast to the decline in university and prison learning partnerships in the UK, such partnerships have become widespread in the USA. Initiatives in the USA range from opportunities for experiential encounter,⁷ to university accredited learning in prison that continues at university post-release.⁸ In this article we introduce 'Learning Together', an initiative whereby students in universities and prisons learn degree-level material alongside one another in the prison environment. Learning Together is inspired by the diverse forms that university and prison partnerships can take and seeks to build upon the long British history of mutual learning⁹ and participatory methods in prisons research.¹⁰ Learning Together recognises that there are many walls, metaphorical or physical, that can keep us all in quite small worlds. As Paolo Freire argues, education can be the practice of freedom: it is a deeply civic, political and moral practice. However, education can sometimes become the 'pedagogy of the oppressed' when knowledge is delivered in ways that are exclusive, exclusionary and didactic.¹¹ By learning together we can engage with knowledge in ways that are both individually and socially transformative.

In this article we describe Learning Together and the values in which it is grounded. We go on to examine the theoretical basis that underpins the design and delivery of this initiative and finally we outline the findings from the evaluation of the Learning Together pilot, which was a collaboration between the University of Cambridge and HMP Grendon.¹²

Learning Together is inspired by the diverse forms that university and prison partnerships can take and seeks to build upon the long British history of mutual learning.

What is Learning Together?

Learning Together uses learning as a means to connect people who otherwise may be unlikely to meet. It aims to do this through co-creating learning spaces within prison whereby students who are currently imprisoned study alongside students from a local university. It prioritises the interactive and engaging delivery of academically rigorous educational content. It facilitates dialogical and experiential engagement with this educational content and models unconditional positive regard as the basis for all relationships.¹³ The Learning Network is a community of prisons and universities who are working together in learning partnerships that respond to local needs and strengths to grow transformative learning cultures.¹⁴

Each week students read two articles on a given topic, and then engage in an interactive lecture followed by discussion of the lecture and the readings in small groups that are facilitated by volunteer early career academics. Dialogue is open to all and if prison staff want to attend sessions they are welcome to participate.¹⁵ We dedicate one week to a group project where two small groups come together to use their shared knowledge to reimagine one aspect of criminal justice. In order to graduate from the course each student writes a reflective essay that is double blind marked. The graduation ceremony is open to students' family, friends, offender managers and supervisors and other officials from the university and prisons. The ceremony's design draws upon Maruna's work on reentry rituals.¹⁶

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7. See for example the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Programme: <http://www.insideoutcenter.org/>
 8. Such as such as through the Prison-to-College Pipeline at John Jay College, City University New York. <http://johnjayresearch.org/pri/projects/nys-prison-to-college-pipeline/>.
 9. We recognise, in particular, the innovative ways in which the Scottish Prison Service is working with universities to enhance learning between students' of both institutions. For example, Sarah Armstrong of the Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research at the University of Glasgow coordinates university level reading groups in partnership with New College Lanarkshire. See similarly in England, Hartley, J. and Turvey, S. (2009) 'Reading Together: the Role of the Reading Group Inside Prison' *Prison Service Journal*, 183, 27-32.
 10. For example, many of the prisoners who went to participate in the University of Durham's 'Inside-Out' programme (in HMP Frankland) participated in the groups beforehand in 2013-2014 run by the University of Cambridge.
 11. Freire, P. (1973) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum International Publishing Group Ltd: London.
 12. See further www.just-is.org.
 13. Rogers, C. (1951) *Client-Centered Therapy: Its Current Practice, Implications and Theory*, Houghton Mifflin: Boston.
 14. Learning Together partnerships have formed, or are in the process of forming, between, for example, HMP Full Sutton and Leeds Beckett University, HMP Gartree and De Montfort University, the University of Cumbria and HMP Haverigg, Nottingham Trent University and Lowdham Grange, Manchester Metropolitan University and HMP Styal.
 15. We are working on a complementary initiative to train staff in prisons and universities about how to interact well with people to promote learning.
 16. Maruna, S. (2011), 'Reentry as a rite of passage', *Punishment and Society*, 13(1), 3-28.

Through Learning Together, we seek to curate communities of learning that have the potential to fill gaps or address deficits in current education provision in prison¹⁷ and simultaneously to challenge the exclusivity of the educational experience of many university students. Whilst prisoners have access to basic education, funding for tertiary education is scarce and, where available, is delivered through a distance learning model that provides few opportunities for learning from peers or through discussion. By Learning Together university students also benefit from learning with and alongside people who may have different life experiences but who, just like them, are seeking to expand their horizons and maximise their potential. But Learning Together is not trying to change people. We are learning with, from and through each other. This changes us all. Learning Together provides opportunities to work with people who we might have thought were different from ourselves and to let this shape our understanding of who we are, and what we do in our lives. All of the interactions on the course are underpinned by a belief in everyone's potential; a potential that emerges through relationships and connections¹⁸ and through the cultivation of what Carol Dweck has called a growth mindset.¹⁹

The design of Learning Together is theory led and its delivery is value led. Learning Together has five core underpinning values: equality, diffuse power, a belief in potential, connection through shared activities and the individually and socially transformational power of togetherness. Learning Together seeks to honour these values consistently across all of its practices. Our commitment to equality and diffuse power means that we think of everyone in the Learning Together

Our commitment to equality and diffuse power means that we think of everyone in the Learning Together classroom as a student.

classroom as a student. Small group facilitators and lecturers are, of course, leaders in the learning space, but they are also learners. We also do not exclude any aspect of a person's identity from the learning space: moments of students' lives of which they are most and least proud are all valid lenses through which to understand and make sense of knowledge.

A further example of our values in practice is that we approach security as everyone's concern: we meet together with all of our students and facilitators at the start of the course to agree upon the rules and practices that will create the kind of learning environment we all want to inhabit. Safety forms part of that discussion, explored dialogically and collaboratively with prison security staff. We all agree to abide by the rules of the prison that houses us. This approach to security is grounded in theories of legitimacy, which suggest that when power is negotiated in dialogue people experience it as good and fair and are more likely to respect the rules.²⁰ This approach also avoids reinforcing 'scary other' narratives that generate anxiety and compound prejudice. Everyone commits to being open about difficulties which may emerge as we learn together. We also all agree to be responsive to feedback and, given consensus, we make changes to the course immediately wherever possible to ensure that feedback is fed forward and makes a difference. In this way, each member of the learning community feels empowered to speak and be heard. We see empowerment as crucial within the Learning Together space because people in prison often have had very disempowering experiences of education which arguably prepare them for the powerlessness of prison life.²¹ Learning Together aims to give opportunities for students to take control of their

17. Criticisms of existing prison education provision include a narrow focus on qualification completion that does not capture or draw attention to the broader potential positive impacts of learning, the limited range of qualifications and subjects on offer, especially perhaps for people serving long sentences, too little funding, a focus on employability at the expense of non-vocational learning opportunities, poor quality teaching, and OLAS contractual inflexibility meaning that too little account can be taken of local needs and interests. See further Prisoner Learning Alliance (2015) 'The Future of Prison Education Contracts: Delivering Better Outcomes': <http://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/resources/the-future-of-prison-education-contracts-delivering-better-outcomes> and the Prisoner Learning Alliance's evidence to the Coates Review on prison education: <http://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/data/PLA/PLA%20response%20to%20Coates%20Review%2019.11.15.pdf>.

18. We are inspired by Christian Smith's work on 'emergent personhood'. In *What is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up* (2010), University of Chicago Press: Chicago, Smith argues 'Humans literally cannot develop as persons without other persons with whom they share and sustain their personhood. To be a person is not to be an incommunicable self, distinct from other selves. It is also to be related to, communicating among and in communion with other personal selves.'

19. Dweck, C. (2006) *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Random House, New York.

20. Bottoms, A. and Tankebe, J. (2012) 'Beyond procedural justice: a dialogic approach to legitimacy in criminal justice' *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology*, 102(2), 119-170.

21. See e.g. Graham, K. (2014) 'Does school prepare men for prison?' *City: Analysis of Urban Trends, Culture, Theory, Policy and Action*, 18(6), 824-836.

own learning by becoming co-creators of the course and the learning space.

The Learning Together 'space' does not stop at the prison walls. By valuing and seeking to cultivate inquiring and independent spirits in our students we hope that the experience of Learning Together will inspire and facilitate life-long learning. As with all university students, we welcome our students to stay in touch with us after the course has finished: we write references for them, we are interested to hear about their progress and we continue working together wherever we can to support initiatives that enrich the intellectual and cultural lives of our institutions. We support the intellectual friendships that our students form, encouraging them to keep in touch with one another through institutional addresses, as is consistent with prison rules. We see Learning Together courses as catalysts for ongoing academic relationships with and between our students, and our universities, and we take seriously our ethical and professional responsibilities to create inclusive spaces of learning in universities just as much as in prisons.²² As the Governor of HMP Grendon, Dr Jamie Bennett, put it, Learning Together is not about being 'smash and grab educationalists'. We believe in investing in our graduates as well as our new recruits. Our graduates are offered the opportunity to undertake a bespoke educational mentoring training course.²³ This capacitates graduates to support new Learning Together students through the anxieties of advanced studies in unfamiliar settings and surroundings. We hope it also helps to embed and spread positive learning cultures beyond the institutions in which we work to new prisons and universities.

Why Learn Together?

Margaret Thatcher famously said 'There is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women

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and there are families.' But in his book, *What is a Person?*, Christian Smith says she was 'dead wrong'.²⁴ He places individual interactions at the heart of becoming, both individually as a person, and more socially, as a community. His explanation of the socially emergent nature of the true potential of individual personhood captures perfectly what we were aiming to achieve in designing Learning Together. The values and practices of Learning Together that were described above grew out of three bodies of literature: educational literature on how people reach their potential, sociological literature on the value of intergroup contact to reducing stigma and prejudice, and criminological literature on how people rebuild their lives to move away from offending. We realised there are striking commonalities between these literatures that emphasise the importance of self-perception; how self-perception is shaped in connection with others; and how these connections provide avenues for the exercise of agency and the movement into new mindsets and new potential futures. In this section we explain and explore these commonalities.

'Communities of learning' provide opportunities for learning new patterns of behaviour through socialisation, visualisation and imitation.²⁵ Educational research shows how peoples' mindsets influence their capacity to learn and change. Mindsets are, in turn, influenced by surroundings. Where potential is recognised to be malleable and there are opportunities for growth, people are more likely to be able to change in the desired direction.²⁶ Mindset and community connection are also important to desistance. People have to be able to perceive a different future to move towards that future.²⁷ This may explain why increased perceptions of stigma are associated with persistent criminal behaviour: perceiving stigma limits perceptions of possible alternative futures. Conversely, we know from the literature that people are more likely to desist when they perceive less stigma and are surrounded by people

22. We welcome the work of organisations such as the Longford and Hardman Trusts, who provide financial support for people with criminal convictions who wish to study. The Longford Trust also runs an academic mentoring scheme. We are currently working with Jacob Dunne to explore university admissions policies and processes for people who have criminal convictions.

23. Our mentoring training is delivered by 'No Offence' award winning, Community Led Initiatives: <http://www.communityled.org.uk>.

24. Smith, C. (2010) *What is a Person? Rethinking Humanity, Social Life, and the Moral Good from the Person Up*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, p.475.

25. Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge. See also Akers, R. (2001) 'Social Learning Theory' in Paternoster, R. and Bachman, R. (eds) *Explaining Criminals and Crime: Essays in Contemporary Criminological Theory*, Roxbury, Los Angeles, pp.192-210.

26. Dweck, C. (2006) *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*, Random House, New York.

27. Shapland, J. and Bottoms, A. (2011) 'Reflections on Social Values, Offending and Desistance Among Young Adult Recidivists' *Punishment and Society*, 13(3), 256-282.

and opportunities that support the adoption and practice of pro-social behaviours.²⁸

Facilitating meaningful contact and interchange²⁹ between social groups, through togetherness, is one way to reduce stigma. If people within and without of prison know one another individually, attitudes towards ex-prisoners in general may soften and this, in turn, has the potential to reduce punitive attitudes and stigma.³⁰ We know from contact theory that where meaningful interchange occurs between people who may hold prejudices against each other in situations that provide opportunities for people to cooperate, as equals, with common goals and the support of social and institutional authorities it can support the formation of friendships and reduce overall prejudice.³¹ This, in turn, supports desistance and the Prison Service's aim to reduce crime.

The coincidences between these literatures persuaded us that there is individually, socially and institutionally transformative potential in growing communities of learning and meaningful interchange between universities and prisons. Our aim for Learning Together was to curate something more than an opportunity for symbolic social inclusion in a place of exclusion. Research tells us that the nature of a space is shaped by behavioural norms³² and that the performance of behavioural norms in social spaces in turn defines individual personas.³³ By explicitly co-creating a community of thought and learning we seek to provide opportunities for the development and exercise of active citizenship. We expect our students to establish, and maintain, classroom social structures that are freeing — that enable them to be themselves and to be with others in ways that they find meaningful. We are not involved in some experiment of social proximity:

We know that positive experiences of education in school and prison are linked to socially beneficial outcomes; increased wellbeing and reduced reoffending.

grounded in Freire's 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', we seek to create learning communities within prisons that provide an education that is forged with, not for, students and which recognise, nurture and empower a sense of personhood grounded in connection that transcends difference.

We know that positive experiences of education in school and prison are linked to socially beneficial outcomes; increased wellbeing and reduced reoffending.³⁴ Our theoretical knowledge suggests to us that these benefits are more likely to be reaped when socially inclusive and cohesive learning opportunities are opened up. Co-creating Learning Together has given us the opportunity to put this theory to the test. In the following section of this paper we share some of what we have learned so far about what happens when we learn together and what that might tell us about the power of connectedness to transform individuals, society and institutions.

What Happens When We Learn Together?

To understand the experiences and impacts of Learning Together we held focus group feedback meetings with students throughout the course, designed and administered a questionnaire to all students, conducted individual interviews with all students and held a focus group feedback meeting with the academics who were involved in delivering the course. In this article we draw on the qualitative data from our observations, interviews and focus groups.³⁵

The overarching theme that emerged from analysis of this data was that Learning Together was an enlivening experience for everyone who participated in it — for the University of Cambridge and HMP Grendon

28. LeBel, T. et al (2008) 'The "chicken and egg" of subjective and social factors in desistance from crime' *European Journal of Criminology*, 5(2), 130-158.

29. As opposed to 'mere' encounter. See further Valentine, G. (2008) 'Living with difference: reflections on geographies of encounter' *Progress in Human Geography*, 32(3), 323-337.

30. Hirschfield, P. and Piquero, A. (2010) 'Normalization and legitimation: modelling stigmatising attitudes towards ex-offenders' *Criminology*, 48(1), 27-55.

31. Pettigrew, T. (1998) 'Intergroup Contact Theory' *Annual Review of Psychology*, 49, 65-85.

32. Cresswell, T. (1996) *In Place / Out of Place: Geography, Ideology and Transgression*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota.

33. Elias, N. (1978) *The History of Manners*, Vintage, New York.

34. See e.g. Layard, R., Clark, A. E., Cornaglia, F., Powdthavee, N., & Vernoit, J. (2014). What predicts a successful life? A life course model of well being. *The Economic Journal*, 124 (580), and 'Evaluating the effectiveness of correctional education: a meta-analysis of programs that provide education to incarcerated adults', RAND Corporation: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR266/RAND_RR266.pdf.

35. We are making use of, and developing, the survey data as part of a five year evaluation of Learning Together funded by the British Academy.

as institutions, venturing into innovative territory, for the academics involved who were accustomed to researching the criminal justice system but not to sharing their research as learning back to participants, and for the students who formed new friendships and understandings in unexpected places and found new meanings and inspiration in their learning. Although we have not yet systematically collected data about the broader cultural impacts of Learning Together, feedback from staff at both the prison and university suggests that the course shaped institutional learning cultures in ways that stretched beyond the impacts described below for those who participated in the course:

'The students are full of enthusiasm and are constantly drawing on their discussions and encounters in Grendon. Learning Together is so good as a supplement to our teaching/discussions on the [Cambridge MPhil] course. So just a big thank you for organising / conceiving.' (Alison, Professor, Institute of Criminology, Cambridge).

'The mentoring training could not have been better timed [...]. We've been struggling to get good quality mentoring in place at Grendon and across most establishments. It is clear we have a lot to develop.' (Andy, Head of Learning and Skills, HMP Grendon and Springhill).

Underpinning the overarching theme of vitality that emerged from the data were new, malleable and inclusive understandings about being, belonging and becoming forged through improbable friendships. Our students described how an expanded sense of belonging through the Learning Together community reshaped their understandings of self and opened up new routes of personal growth and a sense of becoming with newly broadened horizons:

'[Learning Together] broke down my own barriers and the fear that had festered whilst being in prison [...]. It gave me self-esteem and confidence in my own abilities. I felt it was a unified experience that gave prisoners a dialogical concept to connect with society. All education courses in prisons do not provide an opportunity to study with highly educated students from around the world. The open dialogue is a powerful tool to bring everyone

together, it can transform students own experiences and attitudes. Being able to put our past behind us and to do something positive like this has helped our confidence, transforming our lives.' (Zaheer, student, 2015).

Similarly, in the excerpt below Kairo describes how he perceived differences between people from 'his area' and people that would study at Cambridge University. However, he goes on to discuss how, through learning with and alongside these students, he came to realise likenesses:

Q: *'If other people were wondering about doing the Learning Together course what would you tell them about being on the course?'*

A: *'If I phoned someone now from my area [...] and I say to them, 'What would you think about working with some people from Cambridge University?' they'd say, 'What are you talking about?', and probably put the phone down [...] But when you go on the course and you just realise, 'Hold on a minute, these people are just the same as me. They're humans*

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just like me. They've read a few more books, writ a few more statements, cited a few people.' [...] and I just think, 'I can do that'. But then it seems quite daunting before you, kind of, put yourself in that [course]. So yes, I think it [...] makes me, and I think it will make other prisoners, see themselves as, you know, better than what they deem themselves to be. I think that's massive. That's not something you can buy or put a price on. That is massive, because one of the worst things we do is kind of tell ourselves we're not good enough, and that just reinforces you saying, 'It doesn't make sense, there's no point doing it because I can't do it anyway, so let's just stay in this seat and not bother going and sitting in that seat over there because it's pointless.' You know, you hope he's going to get up and say, 'Yes, I can do it and I'm going to go and do it. It's going to be difficult, but I can do it.' I think for me that's just one of the biggest things. Obviously there's loads of other things but the main thing for me is just that.'

Kairo describes how the new sense of commonality generated by the experience of Learning Together cultivated belonging which made him view himself differently and embrace the challenges of growing into new opportunities. After successfully completing the course Kairo decided he would sign up for an Open University degree in criminology, something he had previously thought was beyond him. The correlations between further education in prison and reduced recidivism rates are well known,³⁶ but the mechanisms behind these results have not been well studied. For Kairo, and others on the course, the process involved realising he could be and do something other than that which he had been and had done. He could grow into a new future rather than being fixed in the past. Another of our students, Dean, described his experiences of Learning Together as giving him ‘a sort of undercover confidence [...] the one little bit to say I know who I am and I know where I’m going now’.

The students’ responses to the questionnaire and the interviews all explained how, through connections formed with others on the course, they had developed new perceptions of themselves, of others, of their possible futures and of the sense that they have a role to play in shaping these futures. These connections formed through the shared vulnerability of embracing new academic content in an unfamiliar context. There was a common project at stake and connections formed through being open and honest about limitations and fears:

‘The first thing I asked the other students was ‘did you do the readings?’ They said ‘yes’. I then asked, ‘did you understand those big words?’, to which they replied ‘no’. This was music to my ears.’ (Kairo, student, 2015).

Connections were formed through learning together as equals in the room, and through experiencing interactions as humanist, rather than as humanitarian. As one of our students, Aastha, put it, ‘No one is saving another, both parties are relying on

each other to work together to finish a common task.’ The shared experience of Learning Together with people the students initially perceived as different to them helped everyone to move beyond the stereotypes they had held about each other:

‘I was worried about prejudices against myself from people who I deemed to be ‘toffs’ [...] I thought people like myself don’t mix with people like them, a real ‘us’ and ‘them’ attitude [...] [Learning Together] assisted me in challenging these views by allowing me to mix and study alongside Cambridge University students.’ (Marc, student, 2015).

‘For me, I think [Learning Together] has changed my views, my perceptions [...]. They are people, very intelligent, just like ourselves, you know, if you want, and you should treat them like that.’ (Zac, student, 2015).

Connections were formed through learning together as equals in the room, and through experiencing interactions as humanist, rather than as humanitarian.

What this data suggests is that Learning Together provided a space for meaningful interchange. The course was more than the sorts of mere encounter that Valentine argues can reinforce prejudices because they are thinly veiled by a ‘culture of tolerance’.³⁷ By welcoming difference through accepting

everyone as they are, but also grounding every aspect of the course in the equality of our common humanity, students were empowered to grow in themselves and together, irrespective of their individual starting points.

By connecting with others and connecting with themselves in new ways, students perceived that new and broader social spaces opened up to them. As Christiana (student, 2015) said: ‘We live in a small box, and the only view we have of the outside world is through our piles of books, essays, and articles.’ Learning Together gave students a ‘taste’ of what might be possible, which helped them to imagine and begin to live out new becomings, with new conviction:

‘[Learning Together] made me realise my world was small. I knew a few people on a

36. Davis, L. et al (2013) ‘Evaluating the effectiveness of correctional education: a meta-analysis of programs that provide education to incarcerated adults’, RAND Corporation: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR200/RR266/RAND_RR266.pdf.

37. Valentine, G. (2008) ‘Living with difference: reflections on geographies of encounter’ *Progress in Human Geography*, 32(3), 323-337, p.334.

few streets. I thought universities and places like that were spaces I couldn't go to. But now I realise I can go there. I can exist outside of my small world.' (Eugene, student, 2015).

'It teaches you that not all of society has the same perception about criminals — it gives you a sense of hope that when you get out some parts of society might accept you.' (Muddassir, student, 2015).

'Although [before Learning Together] I believed in second chances, now I think I didn't actually believe in second chances, you know? Yes, if you asked me like two years ago, I'd say 'yes, of course, second chances, yay!' But no, now I believe in second chances, because I saw it.' (Christiana, student, 2015).

Farrall and colleagues have identified how risk thinking can shape the spaces and structures within which prisoners and ex-prisoners are able to form and practice their non-criminal identities³⁸ — but what was interesting to us is that this same risk thinking also shapes and limits the spaces and places and ways in which people who are not in prison live and practice their identities. It keeps people and institutions enclosed in our difference in ways that are exclusive, exclusionary and disempowering. This narrows our thinking and inhibits the potential for productive collaborations between people and institutions.

In contrast to this, as our students connected with each other they also connected with spaces and places outside of their previously 'small worlds'. Eugene realised that universities were public spaces in which he could belong, and Christiana realised the limitations of living in 'a small box' of books and articles and engaging with the 'outside world' only through this academic lens. Muddassir expressed how Learning Together gave him hope that there are people in the society from which he is excluded, by virtue of his imprisonment, who might accept him. This expanded sense of being and belonging opened up possibilities

for playing out new identities and for exercising the newfound agency that Farrall and colleagues argue 'risk thinking' closes down.

Conclusion

There is increasing recognition that policies of mass incarceration, exclusion and incapacitation in response to criminally harmful actions have failed.³⁹ Armstrong and Maruna suggest that smaller, more outward focused prisons that are connected with local communities may be better suited to supporting the individual and social transformations that the criminal justice system seeks to achieve. A better way forward may be through more porous prisons that work in partnership with community institutions to support one another in their missions rather than incapacitating people through disconnecting them from society. Instead of approaching people in prison as sites of deficit to be corrected we could see them as sites of talent, experience and potential to be fulfilled, to their individual benefit as well as to the benefit of our communities.

Through the eyes of our students and their experiences on the Learning Together course, this article has described the transformational potential of opportunities for meaningful encounter that create a sense of individual, social and institutional connectedness and togetherness. By connecting with others through Learning Together, students connected with themselves in new ways and reshaped ideas they previously held about each other and themselves and their roles in society. These connections and realisations opened up a sense of belonging within broadened social spaces in which new futures could be forged. They now felt 'in it together' and that they had a shared responsibility to create the kind of society in which they all wanted to live. Learning Together motivated students to develop new ideas about what it means to be active citizens. For some, this meant that they wanted to become 'visible' within society when before they had always wanted to live 'off grid'. For example, Dean had always avoided being registered on the electoral roll; his experiences of Learning Together prompted a new

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38. Farrall, S., Bottoms, A. and Shapland, J. (2010) 'Social structures and desistance from crime' *European Journal of Criminology*, 7(6), 546-570; Farrall, S., Hunter, B., Sharp, G. and Calverley, A. (2014) *Criminal Careers in Transition: The Social Context of Desistance from Crime*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
39. Armstrong, R. and Maruna, S. (2016, forthcoming) 'Examining imprisonment through a social justice lens' in Stephen Farrall, Barry Goldson, Ian Loader and Anita Dockley (eds.) *Justice and Penal Reform: Re-shaping the Penal Landscape*, Routledge, Oxford.

desire to be seen and known through contributing positively to shaping society by voting.

There is currently increased political will for innovation within the criminal justice sector. From the USA to Europe, high incarceration countries have realised the economic and social costs of politically prioritising discredited 'tough on crime' policies. Economic crises have instigated moral reflection on penal policy. In England and Wales there are new moves towards giving prison governors more local autonomy. This may lead, among other things, to prisons being motivated to make greater use of local community resources and increase connections with other social institutions.

This pilot study of Learning Together has highlighted to us the need to understand not only the experiences for individuals involved in Learning Together courses, but also the broader institutional

impacts of collaborative and connected learning cultures. We know that involvement in education is individually transformative for people within the criminal justice system, but it is possible that Paulo Freire's theory of education as a socially transformative practice of freedom could also hold true when institutions, such as prisons and universities, collaborate through dialogically sharing knowledge and working together to achieve their aims. As Learning Together partnerships expand to reach new prisons and universities, our evaluation will seek to capture and explore these intra-institutional dynamics. In addition to understanding what sort of learning environments best support people to reach their potential and how these environments are created, it may also be important to consider how educational services are commissioned, led and managed so as to maximise their individually, socially and institutionally transformative potential.



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