Special Edition
The Arts in Prison

The Bigger Picture:
Digital Storytelling, Creativity and Resilience in Prisons

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Stretch Digital was conceived as a three-year project—commencing in 2015—developed by the arts charity Stretch and funded by the Big Lottery. Partially in response to increasing calls for digital access and infrastructure in prisons,[1] the project's aim has been to deliver digital training using iPads and simple editing applications into prisons through the medium of digital storytelling. Digital storytelling is a practice that has been used widely in a variety of contexts, from community archiving to corporate storytelling; pioneers of the form include Joe Lambert, who founded the Center for Digital Storytelling in California 25 years ago,[2] as well as the UK's Daniel Meadows whose Photobus project continues to evolve from its 1970s origins.[3] Traditional digital storytelling techniques combine personal narrative with photomontage collated into a short film. Such techniques are made considerably easier in the evolving digital landscape—although not in UK prisons, where access both to photography and digital equipment is heavily circumscribed. In fact, while digital infrastructure is slowly being introduced into some prisons around the UK, Stretch is the only external organisation that—according to available information—has so far been cleared to make digital equipment available to serving prisoners, and has been facilitating digital storytelling projects in prisons since 2011.[4]

Between April and September 2017 I spent several intensive months alongside two practitioners monitoring and evaluating Stretch Digital projects in two Category B male prisons in South London. My background in digital learning, visual culture and narrative allowed me to develop a useful overview of the quality of learning facilitated by a Stretch Digital project, make recommendations for future practice, and start to develop a sense of how meaningful learning can be better implemented in prison settings. My role was to oversee projects (as unobtrusively as possible) and make recommendations to build towards a more robust form of learning evaluation that would be of ongoing use to the development of a defined learning methodology. While it by no means conformed to a standard research project—and was never intended as such—it has hopefully laid the groundwork for future developments and possible research.

There has in recent decades been mounting pressure on schools and educational establishments to provide clear evidence of student learning progression, which has led to an eruption of innovative learning models and digitised analytics intended to systematise learning for failsafe evidential purposes. While prisons are not ostensibly educational establishments, they are nonetheless expected to operate as education providers. Several damning reports on the state of prison education,[5] as well as the highly influential 2016 report by Dame Sally Coates,[6] has led to prisons being required not only to provide, but to demonstrate that they are providing, adequate educational provision. The increasingly privatised and regulated (as well as media-conscious) milieu of the prison landscape has led to increased competition between contracted educational providers (Novus, for instance, openly advertises itself as 'The UK market leader in offender education, training and employability services'),[7] as well as pronounced risk-aversion: providers typically prioritise tangible skills-training and vocational qualifications that claim a

1. Nina Champion and Edgar Kimmett, 'Through the Gateway: How Computers Transform Rehabilitation' (London: The Prison Reform Trust, 2013); Alice Thomson and Rachel Sylvester, 'Give Homesick Prisoners iPads so They Can Stay in Touch', *The Times,* 10 December 2015, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/give-homesick-prisoners-ipads-so-they-can-stay-in-touch-dv7m9sfjz3x; Sally Coates, 'Unlocking Potential: A Review of Education in Prison' (London: Ministry of Justice, 2016), https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/unlocking-potential-a-review-of-education-in-prison.
2. Joe Lambert, *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community* (Berkeley: Digital Diner Press, 2002).
3. Daniel Meadows, 'Photobus', accessed 20 February 2018, http://www.photobus.co.uk/
4. 'STRETCH', accessed 20 February 2018, http://stretch-charity.org/
5. Nikki Stickland, 'Transforming Rehabilitation? Prison Education: Analysis and Options' (Education Policy Institute, 2016), https://epi.org.uk/report/transforming-rehabilitation/
6. Coates, 'Unlocking Potential'.
7. 'Novus', Novus, 4 March 2015, https://www.novus.ac.uk/about

righteous path to the 'straight and narrow' rather than a life of crime.[8]

Charities play a key part in a broader, frequently extra-curricular landscape,[9] but when it comes to securing contracts are forced to compete in the same challenging and risk-averse marketplace. This means the emphasis on evidenced learning evaluation applies as much to them as to the larger providers.

The stated objectives of the Stretch Digital project numbered just three:

❑ Offenders in and out of prison are more confident and better equipped to integrate into the community;
❑ Offenders in and out of prison have gained important digital literacy skills leading to increased employability;
❑ Offenders in and out of prison have increased sense of wellbeing so aiding rehabilitation.

These aims are based on the accumulation of evidence demonstrating the positive net effects of arts education on prison populations.[10] The aims, while modest, are nonetheless difficult to evidence within the parameters of the present project; it is challenging to keep track of individuals even while they are within the criminal justice system, let alone once they are released.

Over the course of several months, we worked consistently with around 25 male prisoners in four cohorts of varying sizes. A number of additional participants attended only one or two sessions, and may not have been registered, making precise overall numbers difficult to calculate. Ages ranged from 19 to 60+, although the majority were aged in their early 30s. Most participants were British nationals, but we also worked with a small cohort of six Eastern European ESOL learners (Polish, Bulgarian and Romanian), as well as their teacher who kindly accommodated us in her classroom. A small minority of British Nationals who completed the course identified as White British (English), and one was Northern Irish Catholic. All other full-term participants were ethnically African, Caribbean, Asian, South American or of mixed ethnicity, and all were born and raised in the UK. Two were Muslim. At least five of the British nationals had attended university, including one individual who had completed a degree in Business Studies at a London university, sandwiched between two long prison stints (the second being unanticipated). Many reported having been in prison several times, and it seemed the cycle had become somewhat normalised. Three of these serial-detainees also reported having been raised in the care system.

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Evaluating Learning: the digital challenge

As demonstrated in the Coates Report, lack of digital infrastructure in prisons makes access to learning difficult and makes the work of prison teaching staff additionally difficult. It limits access to independent learning, which could otherwise take place during the not-unusual 23-hours-per-day cell-time during which most prisoners have little option but to watch daytime TV (which may well be their cellmate's choice of channel);[11] and it seriously disables prisoners from being able to re-enter an increasingly digitised world on release. Digital illiteracy impacts at all levels, limiting access to basic government and other information about rights, finances, employment and helping services.[12] Many younger prisoners will be 'Digital Natives'[13]—fast becoming an outdated term—but this is by no means the case across the board. During my limited time in the two London prisons I met several engaged learners who had very limited digital awareness and no knowledge or experience of the internet. These men were aged approximately between 30 and 50—the lower end of

8. Mark Ellison et al., 'A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the Effectiveness of Prison Education in Reducing Recidivism and Increasing Employment', *Probation Journal 64, no. 2* (1 June 2017): 108–28.
9. Grace Wyld and James Noble, 'Beyond Bars: Maximising the Voluntary Sector's Contribution in Criminal Justice' (New Philanthropy Capital, March 2017), https://www.thinknpc.org/publications/beyond-bars/
10. Larry Brewster, 'The Impact of Prison Arts Programs on Inmate Attitudes and Behavior: A Quanitative Evaluation', Justice Policy Journal 11, no. 2 (2014), https://repository.usfca.edu/pna/7/; 'Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing' (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing, 2017); Paul Clements, 'The Rehabilitative Role of Arts Education in Prison: Accommodation or Enlightenment?', International Journal of Art & Design Education 23, no. 2 (1 May 2004): 169–78.
11. Victoria Knight, 'Remote Control: The Role of TV in Prison', Criminal Justice Matters 59, no. 1 (1 January 2005): 28–29.
12. Yvonne Jewkes and Bianca C. Reisdorf, 'A Brave New World: The Problems and Opportunities Presented by New Media Technologies in Prisons', Criminology & Criminal Justice 16, no. 5 (1 November 2016): 534–51.
13. Marc Prensky, 'Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants', On the Horizon 9, no. 5 (2001).

the scale firmly within the 'Digital Native' bracket. Lack of availability of internet inside the prison estate meant that despite both iPads and good intentions, we were effectively unable to help the prisoners learn how to use a search engine or find a useful website, which was frustrating and disappointing for all concerned. Nonetheless, the fact that they were able to be introduced to digital technology increased their confidence and they showed significant progress in a number of areas.

Without question it is difficult for charities to bring digital technology into prisons, since the movement of iPads constitutes a serious security risk. iPads are a threat to security on a number of grounds. Firstly, they have the capacity to record sound and images. It is an offence to take unauthorised video or sound-recording equipment into prisons; even once authorised, there are strict regulations over what may or may not be recorded and these differ between prisons (and sometimes between visits). Secondly, they have the potential capacity to transmit material both locally between linked machines and globally via the internet; a breach of security would include unauthorised material being both brought in to the prison and sent out. Their portability of iPads makes them easy to steal, and any such breach of security—such as the loss of a machine or the transmission of unauthorised images—would have serious repercussions not only for Stretch but also for prisoners, staff and the prison as a whole. For these reasons it has proven challenging to open new opportunities for Stretch Digital projects because of a tendency towards risk-aversion from the prisons themselves, especially given the current so-called 'prison crisis' and a sensitivity to unwanted media attention.

During a typical Stretch Digital Storytelling project, participants are exposed to a range of learning experiences. Lack of internet access in prisons limits the degree to which practical digital life skills can be taught to prisoners, although all participants typically report improvement in terms of using iPads for creative projects and developing visual literacy. Typically participants will learn basic image and film-editing, and learn how to tell a story using digital images and software. Much time is usually spent recording and re-recording voiceover audios, and in the vast majority of cases the participants are very keen to get their message across in a way that feels most authentic to them.

A significant motivating factor reported by many inmate participants is the idea of being able to have their film broadcast to the outside world in some way, shape or form, whether that be via the internet or given to them on a DVD for their own use. Frequently they are keen to present a visual and vocal critique of the prison system, which of course they cannot be permitted to do if the charity wishes to remain on good terms with the prison and foster any hope of being able to show the films outside. While many Stretch digital stories already exist on the web, on occasion prisons can be especially restrictive in terms of allowing films to be shown outside the prison or even to audiences within the prison, citing security risks. This has caused some problems where prisoners have been severely let down after having worked hard on a project only to have the prison refuse to allow it to be shown and even, in some regrettable instances, requiring the films be deleted for opaque security reasons. It is extremely dispiriting to have work erased in this way, and one might safely assume this to have a demotivating effect on prisoners—possibly hampering or reversing any rehabilitative effects of having worked on the project.

The spectrum of learning activities covered by a typical Stretch project encompasses far more than digital skills. Based on my observations I've attempted to compile an inventory of the learning engendered by a Stretch project in the table below, separated into positive and negative expressions, although this is by no means intended to be exhaustive. For evaluative purposes, practitioners would mark participants on a scale between the two poles:

Positive expression	Negative expression
Contributes positively to group dynamic	Does not work well within a group
Very willing to share personal stories and experience	Withdrawn and uncommunicative
Receptive to hearing about and learning from others' personal stories	Disinterested in others' experience, unwilling to listen
Enthusiastic and engaged approach	Perfunctory/disengaged approach
Able to produce a compelling and well-written script/storyboard	Unable to produce a script/storyboard
Shows significant evidence of personal growth	No clear evidence of personal growth
Able to draw meaning/life lessons from personal experience	Unable to make sense of life's experiences
Curious and willing to learn	Incurious and disinterested in learning
Shows proficiency using digital imaging and editing software	Unable to master basic digital skills
Able to work well with minimal supervision	Needs constant supervision
Excellent structure, style and presentation, demonstrating confident handling of materials	Confused structure, inappropriate style and poor presentation and use of materials
Innivative and/or inspired use of language and/or visuals	Perfunctory and/or derivative use of language and/or visuals

While some of these factors are ostensibly skills-based, I additionally draw specifically on research conducted at the University of Bristol (and which I had the opportunity to help develop for use in schools and universities) which argued that effective lifelong learning can be broken down into seven discrete factors. These are: Resilience; Curiosity; Creativity;

Learning Relationships; Meaning Making; Growth Orientation; Strategic Awareness.[14] According to this model, an individual using all seven of these learning dimensions will be demonstrating so-called 'deep learning', a term more often applied to artificial intelligence; a fact which perhaps shows the increased necessity of humans being able to demonstrate complex cognitive and creative learning capabilities as more and more robots assume responsibility in the workplace. Regrettably this is of even greater importance for ex-prisoners already at a disadvantage when seeking employment on release; not only do they face digital inequality but may increasingly be forced to compete with robots.[15]

There are numerous models of resilience, which have been widely discussed across disciplines.[16] Resilience in an educational context does not necessarily pivot on the precondition of adverse circumstances but indicates, amongst other things, the capacity to keep trying even when one finds a task challenging, and a willingness to persevere in the face of difficulties.[17] It allows learners to take risks, rather than being individually risk-averse (to be distinguished from organisational risk-aversion, as evidenced by many prisons). It must be noted that the precondition of adversity may well assume additional relevance amongst prison populations. There are additional environmental factors which can impact negatively on individual resilience, which responds to consistency and a clear expectation of outcomes. The prison environment—counterintuitively, and despite its inherent strictures, rules and regulations—can often be highly inconsistent and subject to apparently arbitrary rules and changing parameters, which lead to uncertainty and corresponding lack of motivation. This was evidenced particularly clearly during one cohort when halfway through a project one learner, A, left the course in protest after learning he would not be able to keep a copy of his film on DVD having previously been led to believe that this would be possible. Informal interviews conducted during the projects' lifespan

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suggested, anecdotally, that prisoners found the arbitrary nature of prison regulations to be wholly demotivating. In fact, practitioners themselves at times reported feeling despondent, hopeless, trapped and blocked by 'the system'—despite having the freedom to leave at the end of each day. Developing resilience in the face of prison regulations is something that practitioners equally need to develop and is an area where they are likely to need additional support.

Despite these limitations, participants worked well and generally displayed good levels of resilience and ability to commit themselves to the task at hand. This was fostered by the practitioners themselves, who worked hard to create an open, supportive and accepting learning environment. Fostering resilience, persistence, tenacity and grit is particularly valuable for those within the prison system since they face additional obstacles in terms of gaining employment on release, as well as stigma and loss of confidence. Another learner, B, successfully completed a course after initially requesting to have his name taken off the list. During his exit interview he reported that he had initially withdrawn because he thought he'd fail, '*like I've failed at everything else*'. B was particularly pleased to receive his certificate at the end of the course.

Resilience, Curiosity and Creativity are vitally important for our economic infrastructure, which relies on innovators, businesspeople, risk-takers and entrepreneurs. These qualities may assume additional importance for ex-prisoners who inevitably find themselves additionally challenged when finding traditional employment and may need to consider self-employment. Encouraging creativity is not, then, simply of therapeutic benefit (although it is crucially shown to aid mental health and well-being)[18] but is an important component of the ex-prisoner's economic arsenal. The fact that Stretch practitioners are arts practitioners means that they are naturally open to fostering creative approaches to visual storytelling, but this is also an area where they might receive additional support, or even peer support, to

14. Ruth Deakin-Crick, Patricia Broadfoot, and Guy Claxton, 'Developing an Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory: The ELLI Project', *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice 11, no. 3* (2004): 247–72.
15. 'Will Robots Really Steal Our Jobs?' An International Analysis of the Potential Long Term Impact of Automation' (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2018), https://www.pwc.co.uk/economic-services/assets/international-impact-of-automation-feb-2018.pdf
16. Einat S. Metzl and Malissa A. Morrell, 'The Role of Creativity in Models of Resilience: Theoretical Exploration and Practical Applications', *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health 3, no. 3* (10 October 2008): 303–18.
17. Deakin-Crick, Broadfoot, and Claxton, 'Developing an Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory: The ELLI Project'.
18. 'Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing'.

help develop and articulate their own practices. Of the two practitioners I worked with, one was initially far less confident in terms of deviating from a 'standard' digital storytelling format which in many ways lacked creativity and led to some stilted results. Providing additional peer support to the practitioner enabled her to develop more freedom in terms of her own facilitation and significantly improved outcomes. This is evidence of increased resilience on the part of the practitioner dovetailing with creativity, and having a positive impact on both practitioner and participant outcomes.

Overall, participants were encouraged to participate in a range of creative practices, as well as engaging with technical aspects; these included paper-cutting and collage, photo-montage, poetry, prose, games and storytelling practices. One participant, C, showed outstanding talent at art and poetry that had apparently passed completely under the radar since he had never engaged with any arts provision. C was frequently heavily medicated and socially withdrawn, although no background information on his mental health was available. Practitioners allowed him to find his own level, not forcing him to participate in any activities where he struggled to communicate his ideas but rather allowing him to find his own way of approaching the task. He did this with aplomb, creating a wonderful film using his own drawings, and he further went on to create some genuinely astonishing poetry. Throughout the project he became increasingly able to communicate with his peers, asking them to share their own stories and creative efforts, and finding ways to talk non-confrontationally with other men in a way that it seemed had never been possible for him before.

It was frustrating that there was no possibility to 'join the dots' when it came to further helping C. There was no structure in place whereby practitioners could make any recommendations on C's progress to prison staff or submit anything of note to his formal record. Practitioners were not even able to offer support after release since C had no idea how to use the internet or access basic information that would guide him to useful services, much less the Stretch website. While he said he wanted to contact Stretch after release, to date Stretch has received no communication from him.

Learning to work with others is an essential transferable skill. Developing good learning relationships is not only about being able to work in a team or group, but also being able to relate well to teachers, managers and mentors, and also being able to work well independently. Good learning relationships evidence a balance between all these components.[19]

Typically Stretch projects foster positive learning relationships owing to the fact that sharing of personal stories in a nonjudgemental space is often a key component of the project, helping to increase trust-building and empathy. While there is a convention in traditional digital storytelling practice that 'community members' should be trained and fostered as storytelling practitioners,[20] this situation is somewhat different in a prison setting. A prison community is a discrete entity, but members of that community are often moved—without prior notice—into different prison communities, and the fact of being in prison does not make one a member of a monolithic prison community. Even within a single prison a number of discrete communities might exist, so the idea that members of a mythical prison community should be brought in to facilitate 'authentic' storytelling projects is rather deceptive. There is also some suggestion that prisoners—who already live in a very restricted social environment—benefit from meeting (and learning from) those from a different social milieu.[21] In every cohort I observed bonding and support not only between the inmate participants but also amongst practitioners and any prison staff who participated. There was a clear willingness to share and listen in non-judgement, offering help and suggestions to peers.

Learning to self-articulate—to tell one's own story, to have a sense of the meaning of one's life and direction—are important learning factors as identified by the research conducted at Bristol.[22] These factors differentiate between someone who has no sense of autonomy or personally-defined trajectory, and who is

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19. Deakin-Crick, Broadfoot, and Claxton, 'Developing an Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory: The ELLI Project'.
20. Lambert, Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community.
21. Gerard Lemos, *The Good Prison: Conscience, Crime and Punishment* (Lemos & Crane, 2014).
22. Deakin-Crick, Broadfoot, and Claxton, 'Developing an Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory: The ELLI Project'.

just 'going through the motions', and someone who knows who they are, what they're doing, and why. Again, these are important transferable attributes for individuals leaving the criminal justice system and seeking to re-establish themselves in the community. Although the CJS typically encourages prisoners to feel shame and remorse over whatever actions caused them to be in prison, there is substantial evidence that shame is a significant factor in recidivism, and that shame triggers further shame-inducing behaviours.[23] A Stretch project that allows participants to talk openly about their lives without being pathologised or shamed represents an important opportunity for them to think about the course of their lives and put all aspects of their experience into perspective, may help them to move beyond shameful stigma and self-perpetuating blocks.

Visual literacy is a valuable tool in learning, helping to develop abstract thought and higher cognitive skills.[24] Stretch digital storytelling projects that focus on visual literacy help develop this skill, so as much time as possible should be spent allowing participants to select, edit and create appropriate imagery for their stories. Finally, allowing them the time and space to think about how their final story should be presented and what strategies they might employ for optimal effects gives participants the opportunity to engage strategically with the important question of how they wish to tell their own story, what media they will use, and how to present it to the world. One ESOL learner, D, who was also dyslexic, showed considerable difficulty with some of the basic writing tasks set by his English teacher. However, D was enthused by the storytelling activities and spent many hours in his cell between sessions writing, rewriting and perfecting a substantial handwritten script—in English—which he then went on to record and re-record in audio form. At the same time, he collaborated with the Stretch practitioner to create a series of drawings to form a comic strip effect for the film. Again, this process involved much drawing and redrawing, and careful selection of visual metaphors for each stage of the story.

Whereas D had previously struggled with written tasks, he showed himself to have a flair for language and creative expression when encouraged to work on something that was personally meaningful; and there was an additional motivating factor in that he was desperate to share his piece of work—essentially a love story—with his girlfriend on the outside. It was all the more devastating, then, when prison authorities refused to allow the film to be screened at a final presentation ceremony and declared that the film should be erased.

Conclusion

Without question, the prison environment presents a series of unique challenges. It is difficult both for inmates and practitioners to come up against the blocks and vagaries of 'the system', and it's something Stretch and comparable organisations need to prepare for in terms of offering support, whether this comes down to managing expectations or finding alternative ways to disseminate work and incorporating viable alternatives into project outlines. Digital stories from prisons are arguably less of a community archive and represent both a therapeutic and even semi-political space where voices can be heard and dissent articulated (albeit in a limited sense). It is therefore important to recognise the unique impact of prison stories as a part of the criminal justice reform and rehabilitation landscape.

In the course of my observations I have tried to see 'the bigger picture'—not just what concrete skills inmates were learning, but what we could learn about the learners themselves, their hopes and needs, and the learning environment. The tentative conclusions drawn in these pages warrant further research as we move towards developing a more robust evaluation process that takes account of the broad range of social, emotional and cognitive learning one might hope to foster in any organisation, but perhaps particularly in prison contexts.

23.   Daniela Hosser, Michael Windzio, and Werner Greve, 'Guilt and Shame as Predictors of Recidivism: A Longitudinal Study With Young Prisoners', *Criminal Justice and Behavior 35*, no. 1 (January 2008): 138–52; June P. Tangney et al., 'Assessing Jail Inmates' Proneness to Shame and Guilt: Feeling Bad About the Behavior or the Self?', *Criminal Justice and Behavior 38,* no. 7 (1 July 2011): 710–34; June Price Tangney, Jeff Stuewig, and Logaina Hafez, 'Shame, Guilt and Remorse: Implications for Offender Populations', *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology 22*, no. 5 (1 September 2011): 706–23, https://doi.org/10.1080/14789949.2011.617541.
24.   Nicole A. Beatty, 'Cognitive Visual Literacy: From Theories and Competencies to Pedagogy', *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America 32*, no. 1 (2013): 33–42.