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The Arts in Prison

Unlocking talent at HMP Leicester

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Over two weeks in November 2017, HMP Leicester hosted an arts festival; Talent Unlocked. A unique event, conceived by Ralph Lubkowski and organised by Simon Bland with contributions from a number of artists, community and education workers, supported by the governor Phil Novis. In the run up to the fortnight, artists performed at various points around the prison in pop up events. Talent Unlocked was a diverse programme including a voice over skills workshop, creative writing, poetry appreciation, screen printing, music-making and performance. This paper draws from observations, surveys and interviews with prisoners and staff participants to consider the utility of this event for the prison community. Much work focuses on the benefits of the arts for prisoners in achieving educational goals. We use this as a point of departure for considering the wider prison. The concept of civic skills provides a lens for considering the utility of Talent Unlocked in fostering responsibility, relationships and cooperation within the prison community. We move on to consider the benefits for prisoners, as a means of improving wellbeing, offering some respite from prison life and as a gateway for broadening participation in education. We conclude with some reflections on how to build on the success of HMP Leicester's experience.

Within the prison walls is a society within society, adhering to its own rules and rituals. The prison is usefully thought of as a community, a closed society whose inner world requires understanding.¹ Much influential work in prison sociology is concerned with social organisation within prison spaces for this reason.² In so far as democratic societies benefit from active citizens (and there are obvious limitations to comparisons with prison since the majority of citizens are not voluntary participants), it is fruitful to explore the benefits of Talent Unlocked in this context. Associations between

the arts, civic education and good governance have persisted since ancient Greece.^{3,4} Accounts of prisoners and staff suggest participation in the arts fosters civic skills. Such is the implicit understanding of civic skills that few trouble to define exactly what the component abilities are for operating as a competent citizen.⁵ Providing a comprehensive and satisfying explanation would take considerably more space than available in this article. Parallels can be made between 'soft skills' and civic skills as both refer to abilities which are desirable in individuals as neighbours, colleagues or employees:⁶ tolerance, patience, compromise, trustworthiness, conscientiousness. Responsibility, cooperativeness and relationship skills are used as markers for civic skills, demonstrating the benefits of Talent Unlocked to the prison community, and conversely what civic responsibility can teach us about arts in prison.⁷

Responsibility

Inviting participation from prisoners in arts activities and performance invites civic engagement in the prison community by inviting individuals to take active responsibility for their conduct. Dermot demonstrates this when he talks about accepting Simon's invitation to perform:

Simon said 'don't let me down' and I thought no, I don't want to let this guy down.

Dermot wanted to demonstrate he was worthy of the trust placed in him to conduct a public performance (guests from outside the prison were present). Jem echoes this experience when he talks about

...the freedom to do something... and the trust to go in a room, which, sometimes the officer is in with us, but normally they ain't and I think that's a big thing.

1. Crewe, B. (2009) *The Prisoner society: power, adaptation and social life in an English prison*. Oxford; OUP
2. Eg Clemmer, D. (1940/1958) *The prison community*. London: Holt, Rinehart & Winston
3. Flinders, M., Cunningham, M. (2012) *Participatory arts and political engagement*. Arts and Humanities research council
4. Everson, S. (1988) (ed) *Aristotle, the politics*. Cambridge: CUP
5. Kirlin, M. (2003) *The role of civic skills in fostering civic engagement*. Circle Working paper 06
6. Nickson, D., Warhurst, C., Commander, J., Hurrell, S.A., Cullen, A. (2012) 'Soft skills and employability: Evidence from UK retail' *Economic and Industrial Democracy Vol. 33, No.1*
7. Hoffman Davis, J. (2010) 'Learning from examples of civic responsibility: What community-based art centers teach us about arts education' *The journal of aesthetic education Vol.44, No.3*

Trust was repeatedly referred to by the men as a source of pride and a means of asserting positive aspects of their identity. In this way participating in Talent Unlocked offered a remedy to the constraints on autonomy and agency presented by the prison regime.⁸

The value placed on the responsibility associated with such trust was reflected in prisoners' interactions with one another. On several occasions prisoners were observed negotiating with others to moderate their behaviour in order to avoid 'ruining it for the rest of us'. This request was made of one prisoner whose creative process was making a bit of a mess in a screen printing workshop and to encourage an exuberant dancer showing appreciation of a music performance to show a bit more restraint. Speaking specifically about teaching philosophy in prison, Kirstine Szifris identifies the learning process as a means of fostering greater consideration for others.⁹ Mutual consideration for the benefit of the community and cooperation to achieve these ends can be thought of as preconditions for civic engagement within the prison.

Cooperation

While prisoners participated in greater numbers, staff also engaged in a number of workshops and performances, as both audience and performer. Successfully organising such an event requires wide cooperation from staff already overstretched by the demands of the regime, while active participation indicates a broader commitment to the community. A number of staff reported enjoyable experiences, one member of staff saying they had '*just completed the most enjoyable shift in twenty-five years of service*' after attending a concert. Bethany E. Schmidt identifies cooperation as a source of improved prisoner-staff relationships which in turn increase morale and job satisfaction.¹⁰ Observing an officer exchanging knowledge about music-making software with a prisoner, and another singing along to a prisoner's composition offer examples of occasions when staff participation went beyond dutiful conscientiousness.

Cooperation between members of the prison community paves the way for better relationships:

I appreciate what Simon's done, and I appreciate the screws. Even the screws! It's brought me and them closer together cos

before I wouldn't talk to them in prison but now it's building the gap. (Dermot).

The potential significance of this is illustrated by Danny who says the activities '*breaks up the atmosphere, it breaks up the tension between staff and inmates*'. He goes on to illustrate how this works in practice:

...They'll go back and they're like 'ah we did this this morning and it was great' and they'll go back and tell the staff and the staff'll be interested and then they'll give you the time of day and then they'll be like 'do you mind going behind the doors?', 'No problem'. And then the landing runs a lot smoother because the fact they've had their chill time, they're looking forward to the next one...

Here Danny identifies Talent Unlocked and similar initiatives with holding the potential to improve relationships between staff and prisoners, strengthening the sense of community, or civic engagement, within the prison.

Relationships

While the festival gave prisoners the opportunity to display positive aspects of their identity, staff who participated likewise provided prisoners with a rare chance to see parts of themselves normally concealed by the uniform. I asked Marlon what he thought about an officer's spoken word performance and he told me

I didn't know the brer could play them bongos like that... that come from his heart. So I seen him from a whole different perspective now. I'm feeling big respect for him.

As well as exposing a more personal side of this officer, his performance also acted as an expression of shared culture which provided those prisoners with an opportunity to celebrate their cultural identity. Duwayne echoed this new appreciation for what he and the officer had in common:

I just looked at him and I thought he's an officer, but I could relate to him and I thought you know what, that's why he is like that.

On several occasions prisoners were observed negotiating with others to moderate their behaviour.

8. Eg Irwin, J., Owen, B. (2005) Harm and the contemporary prison in Liebling, A., Maruna, S. (eds) The effects of imprisonment. London: Routledge
 9. Szifris, K. (2016) 'Philosophy in prisons: opening minds and broadening perspectives' Prison Service Journal May 2017, No. 225
 10. Schmidt, B.E. (2013) 'User voice and the prison council model: a summary of key findings from an ethnographic exploration of participatory governance in three English prisons' Prison Service Journal September 2013, No. 209

Marlon spoke with pride about where he was from, and said he hoped to return to his homeland upon finishing his sentence. This performance echoed the narrative beyond prison that Marlon was in the process of writing for himself. Duwayne also expressed surprise at seeing staff in this light: *'...the medical guy doing the jazz and blues, I would never have expected that. Not at all.* This capacity for surprising one another with previously concealed talents nurtured empathy and respect.

Involvement in Talent Unlocked also generated some reflection amongst some of those spoken to about their participation in community and how this influenced their life on the outside.

When I'm on the outside I associate with just drug users because they're the only group I really know. But to associate with 'normal' people... it's very good because it shows you that you don't need to have alcohol... to have drugs... to have a good time, you can just sit down and have a conversation about whatever. (Duke)

Duke's account demonstrates that encouraging civic engagement within prison through participation in the arts, has implications for conduct in the wider community. Socialising with a broader range of people—visitors and staff who were present for the opening ceremony in this instance—prompted Duke to reflect on his conduct outside. Most of those performing or running workshops for Talent Unlocked were drawn from outside the prison. Demonstrating a willingness to give of their time for those living and working in HMP Leicester made a powerful statement about the place of the prison within the wider community, drawing these groups closer together. In so doing Talent Unlocked strengthened civic engagement with its city beyond the walls as well as within them.

Wellbeing

Talent Unlocked had benefits for the wider community, both inside and beyond the prison walls, but was also credited with a number of positive effects on a more personal level by those I spoke with. A number of

men reported enhanced wellbeing as a result of taking part. For Duke Talent Unlocked presented him with an *'opportunity to make the most of your time in prison and to vent your, whatever, frustrations or anger you've got'*. Kerwan described himself as having *'mental health issues'*...

...so the best place for me is down here [in the Lambert Unit]. I got PTSD and I don't like crowds and it's too noisy out there, too much going on and it makes me crazy and I fight.'

He credited the opportunity for making music Talent Unlocked afforded him as helping to get his *'feelings out'*. He also said it *'gets people out their pad. Gets some structure in the day'* and proudly showed me the CD he had put together. Samir echoed this capacity for exposure to the arts as offering some respite from the harsh prison environment. He described the DMU orchestra performance as

A Shawshank Redemption¹¹ moment. Just an escape from all this noise, and hear something a bit more beautiful, more peaceful.

Talent Unlocked lent prisoners the ability to carve out space to explore and express emotions. Both Danny and Samir

referred to fellow prisoners who had recently received bad news deriving considerable comfort from events in the festival:

From lighting a candle for a loved one who's lost, to dancing to jungle book... You know he was so lifted by that. (Danny).

These accounts illustrate how important the arts can be for enhancing wellbeing^{12,13} in prison, offering prisoners the opportunity to feel *'a purpose, a meaning, an existence as a human being'* (Danny).

Reasserting a sense of shared humanity creates space for enhancing civic skills, enhancing empathy.

Pride

In addition to emotional comfort, a number of prisoners also reported feeling pride as a result of participating in Talent Unlocked:

Talent Unlocked had benefits for the wider community, both inside and beyond the prison walls...

11. Shawshank Redemption (1994) [film] Castle Rock Entertainment, U.S: Columbia Pictures.

12. Hughes, J., Miles, A., McLewan, A. (2003) Doing the arts justice: A review of research literature, practice and theory. The Unit for the arts and offenders centre for applied theatre research.

13. O'Brien, R. (2010) 'The learning prison' Royal Society for the encouragement of arts, manufacture and commerce.

You see my name on there? That makes me feel proud. It's only a piece of paper with my name on it, but I've never had that. Usually you see my name in the paper for doing something shit. (Dermot, displaying a performance programme).

When asked why he had chosen to participate, Pete told me he had wanted *'to become involved in the group. To try and inspire others as well'*. This idea of leading by example, and providing a role model for others to follow articulates the connection between individual achievement and collective responsibility. When asked to elaborate Pete said: *'I'm not a very confident person so I'm trying to test myself'*. He had participated in a poetry appreciation class that afternoon, and felt sufficiently at ease to extend a little outside his comfort zone. Pete also emphasised the importance of seeing examples of artistic endeavour amongst his peers.

Recognition from fellow prisoners was a source of considerable pride:

When I got back to my wing last night, cos my wing's just there everybody heard it and I got back and they were all going mad. But it was good man, it was real good. (Duke)

Duwayne referred repeatedly to other prisoners and staff telling him he *'smashed it'* in his performance. He was attempting to appear humble but his elation was clear as he managed to shoehorn this in to the conversation a number of times. Participation in Talent Unlocked also provided prisoners with an ongoing means for connecting with others, as Jason said *'I'm looking forward to showing people this'* (referring to music he had made). In these ways Talent Unlocked provided the prison community with opportunities to celebrate one another's talents and achievements while attempting to inspire others to follow. In making space to appreciate positive attributes of one another, participating in the event also ignited a desire to see peers similarly benefit, fostering a sense of community.

The arts as a 'benign gateway'

Civic skills are sought after by prospective employers. In supporting their development the arts can act as a tool

for increasing prisoner's employability.¹⁴ This is not to deny the need for expanded education provision in prison or to advance the idea that the arts are in any way sufficient to address the complex educational needs of the prison population.¹⁵ Nevertheless, in addition to providing prisoners with the means to satisfy the desire to keep occupied—*'I wanted to fill up my days, we all do'* (Samir)—the arts can function as a benign gateway to broadening participation in other strands of education. Memories of school are often unhappy ones for those in prison, with high rates of exclusion, truancy and low educational attainment.¹⁶ Lesser association between the arts and formal education therefore has the advantage of embracing the informal dialogues and importance of learning for learning's sake which characterise more positive experiences of re-engagement with education.¹⁷ Danny highlights this potential when he talks about a

prisoner who *'can't read and write [who] came to a poetry thing yesterday and he couldn't write it, but he spoke it. And then we used it and he got involved'*. Here the informal setting and encouragement of his peers presented the opportunity to use other skills to engage with the group. Danny also spoke about how exposure to the arts through Talent Unlocked had altered his outlook:

when I get on the outside, I'm going to find somewhere orchestral bands play events, and I'm gonna go to them... I'm going to have a new perspective on life because I need to.

While not indicating a specific intention to explore formal education, Danny credited his experience of Talent Unlocked with increasing his skill set for coping with the stresses of life outside. Samir made this association more explicit when, talking about a workshop on Shakespeare, he said *'it pure inspired me. Got me hungry'*. In this sense the focus of learning is less important than the method of teaching.¹⁸ Engagement with learning is a process which extends beyond education to participation in broader concerns of social action

When I put my mind to something I can be creative... but I can't be that if I don't have the

14. Ofsted (2012) Skills for employment: assessing training and support. No.110178.
15. Coates, S. (2016) Unlocking potential: a review of education in prison. Ministry of Justice.
16. Prison reform trust (2017) Bromley briefings Prison factfile, Autumn 2017.
17. Warr, J. (2016: 19) 'Transformative dialogues: (re)privileging the informal in prison education' *Prison Service Journal* May 2016, No.225
18. Jennie Henley in correspondence on shared learning outcomes and pedagogy April 2018, also see Henley, J. (in press) Music, emotion and learning In Gouk, P., Kennaway, J., Prins, J., Thomahlen, W. (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Music, mind and wellbeing: Historical and Scientific perspectives*. London: Routledge.

support of other people. And people praising me makes me be more positive and do positive actions (Dermot).

Here Dermot echoes Plato's assertion that the arts are a means of fostering greater civic engagement.

Some lessons learned

Organising an event of this size offered some learning opportunities, in practical terms, with regards methods of recording data as a means of assessing impact, and in maintaining the momentum. Publicity for the event was insufficient to convey the purpose and content. Prisoners were unclear about what would be involved or required of them at specific workshops, as Callum said:

I know a lot of people didn't know what we was doing... cos there's not much detail about what the date things are to people on that sheet so if there was more in a leaflet, more detail, just one sentence doesn't really explain a lot.

Ralph reflected on this mid-festival, concluding that symbols denoting the type of activity and degree of involvement required would have reduced suspicion and added clarity. In retrospect it is quite understandable that uncertainty about the nature of the festival would inhibit engagement from some. Signing up for things without knowing details is not something that always pans out well for prisoners. Sign-up sheets on the wing were inconsistently used. More explanation would likely have increased and widened participation as it would have lent the festival more appearance of transparency. These difficulties were exacerbated by the particular challenges presented by a small local prison with extremely high churn.

Anticipating precisely what information to collect in tandem with organising an event of this size for the first time presented a challenge. While attendance was monitored via lists and feedback surveys, anonymising these made it difficult to accurately assess the breadth of engagement. Duplication of lists with sign-up sheets to

ensure accurate records of prisoner's location further compromised these efforts. Security is, of course, always the first priority in prison. Building on the momentum created by Talent Unlocked to widen participation requires a sustained effort, not without difficulty in an institution with a rapidly changing population and the attendant concerns of running a prison. Dermot expressed both the frustrations and potentials offered by such an event:

*No one was interested at the start but then it snowballed in to this... out of a hundred people you're gonna get forty knobheads who don't want to know and p** about. And out of that hundred you're maybe gonna change forty... but then the next time, the ones that didn't change think maybe I'll have a go...so it's a snowball effect...*

The difficulty in capturing these processes in a measurable, quantifiable form was a source of considerable frustration for Ralph and Phil:

This is where you need to do proper evaluation of this stuff. So okay six months ago you attended this session—are you taking it forward, is it having any effect, have you stopped being violent, have you stopped self-harming. (Phil)

Anticipating precisely what information to collect in tandem with organising an event of this size for the first time presented a challenge.

Ralph spoke about the need for longitudinal research to assess the long-term impact of such initiatives. Both reflect the difficulty of communicating such complex processes in a clear quantifiable format for HMPSS digestion. Obstacles to demonstrating the value of Talent Unlocked echo the unhelpful distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' skills and persistent inadequacy in capturing the former despite widespread acceptance of their importance.¹⁹ At the same time, the exemplary MQPL^{20,21} demonstrates how effectively qualitative aspects of prison life can be captured quantitatively as well as how enduringly influential such efforts can prove to prison policy. These challenges clearly illustrate the potential of working more closely across fields to better capture the benefits of such initiatives.

19. Heckman, J.J., Kautz, T.D. (2012) Hard evidence on soft skills. NBER Working paper series no: 18121. Massachusetts: National Bureau of Economic Research.
20. Lieblich, A., Arnold, H. (2005) Prisons and their moral performance: A study of values, quality and prison life. Oxford: OUP.
21. NOMS (2015) Internal audit and assurance: Measuring the quality of prison life (MQPL) and the Harris review: Self-inflicted death in custody among 18-24 year olds.

Building on success

Phil expressed a great deal of frustration at the difficulty of making such nebulous benefits more tangible:

I would've hoped this would have had some impact in terms of the violence and the rest of it and it hasn't. You could argue, that because there's no control group, that actually violence would have been higher without it... the data doesn't suggest that. I'm in the top five violent prisons in the country.

Such ambition underscores the high stakes involved in such an initiative, and consequent anxiety about demonstrating its benefits. Offsetting the cultural capital of violence in prison by investing value in learning and community is not an instantaneous shift but rather a slow process of cultural exchange.²² It is also the case that there is a complex relationship between levels of violence, trust, staff-prisoner relationships and levels of reporting which official figures may conceal.²³ While there was frustration at the difficulty in capturing the net values of Talent Unlocked, elsewhere Phil acknowledged the ongoing nature of the process:

We learn for next time. You continue to learn, so that's continuous improvement, that's what we're getting out of it. As a prison it fits absolutely with [us being a] part of the community.

There was also clear awareness of a shift in staff culture:

If I now say to staff we're doing this they say okay, because they've seen the benefits. It's this energy from the lads when they ask what's next.

These cultural shifts formed part of a larger, incremental process which allowed each event²⁴ to build on the 'energy and the buzz' from the one before, each providing 'a springboard if you like, so what's next, let's keep pushing'. Simon contrasts his experience at HMP Leicester with thwarted attempts to launch innovative

projects in other prisons. This differentiates HMP Leicester from other prisons where 'it's difficult to get anything done' (Simon). Attempts to identify clear impact from Talent Unlocked by assessing its effects, are looking in the wrong place. It is the conditions created by a more receptive culture which have allowed such an ambitious event to take place. Talent Unlocked is the manifestation of positive cultural change; the effect, not the cause. The challenge lies in maintaining the momentum for civic improvement in the prison community.

Talent Unlocked demonstrates the broad value of widening access to the arts for the prison community. While the intangible similarity between civic skills and those characterised as 'soft' represent significant challenges to quantitative attempts to capture and assess them, prisoner and staff accounts indicate that the festival was regarded as an enriching experience. Investing trust in prisoners by inviting them to take part in activities or performance created space for exhibiting their acceptance of responsibility. Organising and sustaining such an event required a significant amount of cooperation from all participants; prisoners and staff. In creating opportunities to display different aspects of each other Talent Unlocked nurtured sentiments central to sympathetic relationships such as respect and understanding. In addition to various benefits for the wider prison community, prisoner participants identified more personal gains. The festival provided opportunities for improving wellbeing and prisoners reported enjoying a rare opportunity to forget they were inside. Access to the arts also provided a benign gateway for considering participation in other aspects of learning.

While Talent Unlocked was a steep learning curve, problems in recording and assessing less tangible benefits of such an initiative reflected wider challenges represented by the task. The cultural conditions of HMP Leicester were conducive to this innovative project. In this sense it is accurate to view Talent Unlocked as part of a wider process of cultural improvement within HMP Leicester. Acknowledging this alleviates some pressure to measure what is difficult to quantify. The biggest challenge perhaps lies in sustaining the impetus for change to access the hardest-to-reach groups in the furthest corners of the prison, to keep unlocking more talent, in HMP Leicester and beyond.

22. Bourdieu, P. (1984/2010) *Distinction*. Routledge Classics. London: Routledge

23. See 18.

24. HMP Leicester has hosted a number of innovative events including a number of music performances from DeMontfort choir and orchestra, a Shakespeare festival, the first Tedex event to be filmed from a prison in England and Wales and most recently a Science-art project in collaboration with the national space academy.