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Prisons and Universities: Co-creating Curricula for Prison-University Partnerships

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Abstract: *This paper illustrates the approach of co-creating education where co-creation was an important aspect of the curriculum design. It makes a case for prison-university partnerships through two pedagogical case studies – one within a prison setting with a focus on soft skills acquisition and another in a Higher Education setting focusing on international criminal justice. Originating from the observations and reflections of an educator which led to a participatory action research opportunity, it asserts that actively teaching and learning together increases effective learning through better understanding and motivation, as well as giving access to the right to education regardless of ‘space and place’. Using Iversen and Stavnskær Pedersen’s (2017, p.24) five stages to the design progression of co-creative teaching, the article discusses the process, progress, and evaluation of the practical approaches to teaching and learning and how they could form a beneficial and successful partnership when considered in tandem. It is recognised that by bringing higher education into the closed prison context, the universal right to education is realised, since people behind bars are given the same opportunities as students in the community. Furthermore, it further enhances aspects of civic responsibility and understanding through a lived-experience approach with the students in the community. Finally, the article illustrates how such partnerships show a significant adherence to the Council of Europe’s (1990) Recommendations for Prison Education, giving prison educators a tangible ‘what works’ way forward in teaching and learning.*

Keywords: *Prison education; higher education; university; partnership; teaching; learning*

Introduction

This article originated from the observations and reflections of an educator which led to a participatory action research opportunity. The role of an educator in different contexts, from a prison, a ‘total institution’ (Goffman, 1961), to a higher education institution (HEI) served a function not unlike that of an active ethnographer. This gave the unique opportunity to experience teaching and learning, using co-creative methodologies, in different scenarios. On the one hand, through the SkillHUBS project, 15 men in prison co-created an arts-based programme which focused on soft-skills acquisition. Within the university context, students co-created a core master’s level module on criminal justice in the global context where, added to knowledge on the global perspective, critical thinking and comparative research were essential skills to acquire. In both situations, one aspect of teaching and learning was focused on building a foun-



dation based on effective practice and positive effects for merging learning spaces. When reviewing the co-creative pedagogies within both teaching environment, the potential for a prison-university partnership was conceptualised. Both groups of students mirrored each other in terms of personal motivation in creating their learning journey, taking on the role of active participants. It was recognised that by bringing higher education into the closed prison context, the universal right to education is realised, since people behind bars are given the same opportunities as students in the community. Furthermore, it further enhances aspects of civic responsibility and understanding through a lived-experience approach with the students in the community.

Thus, both teaching and learning journeys provided an opportunity to mould such scenarios into a potential prison-university partnership. This paper illustrates the approach of co-creating education using the two case studies, where co-creation was an important aspect of the curriculum design. This leads the paper into a discussion on why it would be good practice to adopt the pedagogy into a prison-university partnership. To structure this article, Iversen and Stavnskær Pedersen's (2017, p.24) five stages to the design progression of co-creative teaching is used. This allows a thorough discussion on the process, progress, and evaluation of the practical approaches conducted and how they could form a beneficial and successful partnership when considered in tandem.

There are three main rationales behind these aims: i) that education, as a valuable good (Council of Europe, 1990) has two main purposes: the development of the person (Mulcahy, 2008) and the development of knowledge (Tan, So and Yeo, 2014), leading to desistance and a society which is built on mutual respect and kindness; ii) that education should not discriminate through space, excluding those behind bars; and iii) then leads to the conclusion that an established way to realise rights to education successfully is through prison-university partnerships (Prisoners' Education Trust, 2018).

Within the university environment, the module creation and teaching were part of the author's job description. It was slightly different within prison, where the programme was provided as a taught initiative which was authorised to run as part of the education provision of the prison. Therefore, neither programme was a research project per se, but rather an applied opportunity for reflection and potential collaboration. This portrays the nature of research since it should be product of normal everyday practice rather than as a means towards an end (Clarke & Erickson, 2003). However, formal ethical approval was then granted by the university for the comparisons to be made.

1. Case Studies in Action

Leading into the actual practice, Iversen & Stavnskær Pedersen (2017) describe five stages whereby students and teachers communicate and co-operate through dialogue, in a co-creative manner. The authors discuss a progression, or design-model, which describes the various phases that occur during a co-creative environment, where teaching and learning is developed by both tutors and students. Within this paper, each stage of Iversen & Stavnskær Pedersen's (2017) model is interpreted for both educational environments – prison and university - in relation to the two specific projects. As an overarching factor, Norton's (2009, p. 70) ITDEM (identifying, thinking, doing, evaluating, modifying) is followed. Norton (2009) describes the enhancement approach to action research, whereby emphasis is also put on the social and political context of the practice, which as illustrated by Grudy (1982) is informed by theory.

2.1 Framing / contextualising

Iversen and Stavnskær Pedersen (2017) first process to a learning dialogue is 'clarifying both the where and the why' of the context in this learning and teaching journey. Through the lens of a practitioner-researcher, a co-creative method within two different settings was established. Through the Erasmus+ SkillHUBS Project, the co-creative method was piloted within a prison environment. SkillHUBS, an Erasmus+ funded transnational project, running across 7 partnerships and countries, researched, developed, and piloted methods in upskilling

prisoners in preparation for their return to the workforce. The aim of the project was to develop a transnational training model for people in prison which could be introduced into European prison education systems. SkillHUBS focused on two groups of skill-sets – basic skills (literacy, numeracy, and digital skills) as well as transversal skills (creativity, complex problem solving, and critical thinking). Within a Higher Education Institution (HEI) it was undertaken through the module coordination of a master's module with a specialisation in international criminal justice.

From the perspective of a pedagogist, an awareness of how students learn and an understanding for the need for individual methods and processes is essential. Since learning according to sociocultural theorists is a process constructed through collaboration and interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), in both cases, a co-creative approach would be the most effective way forward. This would enable a two-way stream of knowledge to be passed between tutor and the students, giving strength to differences and motivating students to use their individual academic and personal circumstances to their full potential. In a nutshell, the co-creative approach involves tutors and students working together towards one common goal – effective learning. Within this approach, students are given a protagonist role in their learning journey, being given more responsibility about how and what they learn (Ribes-Ginera et. al., 2016), leading to their empowerment. Co-creation is similar to what Cook-Sather, Bovill and Felten (2014), define as ‘partnership in teaching and learning’, as a ‘collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis’ (pp. 6-7). Thus, whereas the traditional concept of a curriculum has been the realm of the academic, a co-creative approach moves away from a passive ‘one-way flow’ of knowledge from an academic to the student (Skipper & Pepler, 2020). Educators let go of fixed agendas, allowing room for emerging issues and views to be articulated within a group context (Iversen, & Stavnskær Pedersen, 2017). To illustrate active student learning, Bovill and Bulley (2011) adapted Arnstein’s (1969) model of citizenship participation to curriculum design, where the students become the new citizens. The lowest two rungs of the ladder show tutors taking full control of the learning, with the highest rung giving total control to the students. A co-creative curriculum would fall on the seventh, out of eight, rung, dubbed ‘partnership – a negotiated curriculum’, which entails students and tutors working together. This would mean that although students do not have full control of the curriculum (as they would on the eight, and final, rung), students would still have control of the decision making, having substantial influence on their learning.

In philosophical terms, co-creativity encompasses the hybrid theory idea of the ‘third space’, which as Moje et. al. (2004) argue, draws upon three concepts: (i) bridge-building between marginalised and academic discourse; (ii) navigation of various discourse communities; and (iii) the challenging of dominant discourse through open discussion. This ‘third-thing’, as similarly dubbed by Katzenstein and Frank (2019) is a construction of ideas, insights, and desires which belong in the space between teacher and student, the idea of teaching with rather than teaching to. These concepts lead to the samples chosen.

Prison Context: SkillHUBS

Within prison, the SkillHUBS project provided a solid sample size of 15 incarcerated people in Malta, who all saw the project through. The innovation within the project, in line with adult education and the rationale behind co-creative pedagogy (Baddell, 2017), was the link between the economic sector in terms of employers and the prison provisions. To provide timely, effective, and practical up-skilling, an Employer Skills Assessment and an Employer Gap Analysis was conducted in the three pilot countries (Malta, Slovenia and Romania). This included data collection from the main local industries and employers to determine gaps in skills and training within the employment industry. The result of this gap analysis was the springboard for co-creative training, where prisoners had the opportunity to bridge this gap using co-creative prison education.

University Context: International criminal justice module

The University context came in the form of a Level 7 Masters module on international criminal justice at a University in England. This module is a core module for students pursuing an international criminal justice master's degree. It focuses on various aspects of international justice, highlighting human rights and global policies and recommendations. Through the module, students compare, contrast and debate aspects on the global scene within the police, courts of law and prisons. The module is the first module the students will engage with; therefore, it should provide them with the comparative skills necessary for the successful completion of their degree. Due to philosophies, theories and practice of international criminal justice being so vast, as well as the attraction of several overseas students onto the course, co-creative methodologies were adopted so that students are given more freedom to choose which elements to focus on. Fourteen students were registered on the module in this cohort.

The Educational Context

The context--sociological, educational, and otherwise--under which education is framed is a crucial deciding factor in the accessibility of learning. As Tate and Rousseau (2002) state, it is naïve to assume true democratic access of education across demographic groups. This lack of conformity in education limits human potential as well as economic opportunity for the outgroup. This is an essential context to take into consideration as even though education holds the status of a human right (United Nations, 1948), some groups, oftentimes deemed as non-citizens, for example prisoners, are excluded from access to education (Riis, 2018), even though incarcerated students are no less able to embark on HE journeys than are their non-incarcerated peers. They might have faced numerous disadvantages, for example coming from less advantaged backgrounds (Useem & Morrison Piehl, 2008), having been formally excluded from school at a younger age (Coates, 2016) and oftentimes having a lower level of self-awareness and adjustment (Clark & Loewenthal, 2017). Despite this, studies have shown that they crave education, professionalism, and the chance to practice higher levels of skills (Hall & Killacky, 2008). Regrettably, in England and Wales, prison education has been in “a poor state” in terms of both quality and number of participants, with a 2020 Ofsted report stating that two-thirds of inspections showed poor management of education (House of Commons, 2022). This is due to several factors, not least a lack of different levels of education for people in prison; not having certifications to show potential employers; inadequate time and resources for prison education (University and College Union, 2022); infrastructure not fit for higher education; and prison education funding being significantly lower than community education (Association of Colleges, 2022).

The situation in Malta is no different. Yet, within the Recommendations for Education in Prison, The Council of Europe (1990) state that people in prison should have the same opportunities at education as anyone in the community, to develop the whole person, be conducive to rehabilitation and therefore reduce recidivism. Furthermore, within her Unlocking Potential: A Review of Education in Prison report, which was commissioned by the UK's Secretary of State for Justice to review prison education and offer recommendations on its improvement, Coates (2016) calls for higher education in prison to be more than mere ‘isolated events’ and recommends that ‘pathways are facilitated for prison learners to gain access to college or university on release’ (p.55). The situation is even more dire in Malta, where a clear education plan, or educational opportunities, are not given to individuals, and no formal prison-university partnerships are established. A ‘culture of education’ supported by all departments needs to be established for this education profile to be lifted successfully (House of Commons Education Committee, 2022). Therefore, especially considering the Ministry of Justice (2022) prison strategy white paper's claim that “prison education has also not kept pace with the increasingly high standard of skills required by employers in the community”, such a partnership will serve to overcome these barriers to prison education.

Prison-University Partnership Context

An established way to realise rights to education successfully is through prison-university partnerships (Prisoners' Education Trust, 2018). This endeavour is one such pathway in bringing prison education out of being an 'isolated event' (Coates, 2016). The objective behind a prison-university partnership involves community-based students learning alongside students behind bars. This could be anything from seminars to short courses (McFarlane & Pike, 2020), with various initiatives currently in place in the UK, for example through Durham University, based on the US Inside-Out programme, as well as other programmes run by the Open University and the Prisoners' Education Trust. In this way, prisoners would be in a better position to study with community students, gaining deeper community values in addition to their formal education. A love for learning, commitment to pro-social aims as well as deeper levels of interpersonal trust and peer-to-peer support is fostered through such co-operations (Kallman, 2020). Partnerships create community investment, benefitting prison administrators, universities, community students, students behind bars, and society itself. Such dynamics foster active knowledge exchange as well as self-realisation, aiming for wider social change. It creates an inclusive learning community, standing on foundations of equality and mutual respect (Gray, Ward & Foggarty, 2019).

With this (potential) context in mind, the next stage of Iversen & Stavnskær Pedersen's (2017) process, finding the questions, is considered to find a solution to these barriers, illustrating learning aims, outcomes and pathways.

2.2 Finding the questions

According to Iversen & Stavnskær Pedersen (2017), defining the challenges as well as the 'what' of teaching is essential, therefore, in both instances the questions the learners needed to 'solve' as well as the barriers they needed to overcome formed a major part of the learning journey. When considering this stage, two questions were posed to ensure that all facets of learning are being acknowledged, including individual and situational differences. Initially what – what learning is going to take place – needed to be established. However, it was then realised that for learning to be successful another, perhaps more important, initial question needed to be answered – who are the learners and what are their barriers towards learning? Without understanding the full picture of this sociocultural context, a strong learning environment could not be created. When looking at both groups at face value it was realised that although the two cohorts showed stark differences, not least liberty vs incarceration, there were also strong similarities. Both groups of learners embarked on this learning journey to brighten their prospects, both personally and professionally. Therefore, all learners were learning voluntarily. Rationalising in terms of Dewey's (1913) theories linking active learning and motivation would mean that their interest levels were high. However, it was found that the latter point was not the case for the students behind bars, and they were in fact, more initially resistant to the programme than was anticipated.

Therefore, both groups of students, and their barriers, needed to be understood in more detail to move onto the next stage within the process. One group of students were people in prison and came from less advantageous backgrounds and lower academic prospects. They were all males, Maltese, with ages ranging from 30 to 55. For this group, the barriers came in the form of power dimensions in terms of space and location since, as asserted by Gulson and Symes (2007) 'the language of exclusion is, by and large, spatial; who's in, who's out, at the heart, on the margins.' This concept is very clearly identified in a prison, with prisoners forming one such excluded group. Various theories and statistics speak of the revolving door theory, where prisoners are 'stuck' within this cycle of incarceration and unemployment. However, there is little acknowledgement of the fact that these same individuals were perhaps 'stuck', and denied opportunities, before getting engulfed by the system (Farley, & Hopkins, 2017), and then again within the system by being denied education. This was the situation for these students who had the added barrier of a lack of formal education, opportunities behind bars in

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2.3 Co-designing micro-prototypes

be found, bringing both aspects together to overcome what Fuller et al (2015) dub the ‘three-way classification of barriers’ as discussed above: the situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers. Thus, for learning to take place, the next stage was for a potential teaching design, or solution as referred to by Iversen & Stavnskaer Pedersen (2017), to be created. A springboard was established within the finding a question stage in preparation for the co-designing of sessions with a dynamic flow between the learning goals, challenges, and creativity. As Brown and Isaacs (2005) argue, it is more effective to have learners experience rather than passively receive information, and through this dynamic process, students are given autonomy on their learning. As stated by Ravn (2007, p.215) ‘students are actively constructing their worlds’ already, so the natural next step is the construction of their educational journey.

Therefore, when drawing up guidelines for the sessions, the philosophies of the ‘third space’ and co-creation encompassed the situation nicely, and it could clearly be seen how all three points would be beneficial for all students. Learners’ personal motivations for being part of the sessions needed to be understood. This was simpler to do on campus. Prior to the start of teaching week, an introduction session for the master’s students was held, where the aims were formal introduction and an overview of the learning outcomes, but also to share backgrounds, interests, and plans. The students revealed they were from varied backgrounds, both academically and globally. Individuals from different countries were registered and present ranging from England to France to the United States. Furthermore, students came from an interesting mix of disciplines, adding the positive facet of an inter-disciplinary team. Students had the expected criminology backgrounds, but others had an added background in law and sociology. This within itself was an advantage for the effectiveness of a co-creative methodology for the module. The picture of students bringing these diverse backgrounds and every-day practice from the different countries, societies, cultures, and disciplines to the module, in a very ‘lived-experience’ manner was immediately painted. Such an endeavour would pleasantly balance the scales in terms of teaching-learning they had so much to offer, even when only looking at this one aspect of diversity. In the same way that the lived experience of service users, be they prisoners or probationers, is of utmost importance in forming a more just and fair criminal system (Jewkes, 2014; Ventura Miller, et. al., 2012), the lived experience of students who are the future advocates and practitioners within this system are as important. They could bring to the table good practices, what works, what does not work and strong in-depth discussions and analysis of different concepts of international criminal justice. This is ultimately what a comparative international justice should be based on (Pakes, 2019). These differences had already opened the opportunity for a very exciting co-creative journey.

Therefore, acknowledging participant needs which revolved around social skills, piloting in Malta took on an artistic approach, mainly employing the creativity aspect of SkillHUBS. The training sessions were aimed primarily at social skills coaching through the fine arts, which helps individuals build on their social capital. In opposition to hard skills, which are acquired through formal education, by way of professional, technical, or academic programmes (Carter et al., 2018), soft skills, also called non-cognitive or people skills, are more focused on personal traits, attributes, behaviours and qualities (Fan et al., 2017). As with the delivery of the master’s module, these sessions needed a team of tutors to provide the best possible expertise. Earlier on in the project, a train the trainer week-long workshop in the co-creative methodology was held and two fine art practitioners and academics attended. It was simple to see how well they fit into this project.

In both learning environments, with different context and with unique learners, a prototype was created with a strong emphasis on what is interesting, useful, and alluring for the learners. It is interesting that where one section was weaker in a particular learning environment, namely the co-creation of a prototype in prison, the co-operative performance effectively strengthened the methodology. Ironically, the learning environment seemed to rotate roles within the next stage, and the campus-based students were not as high up on Bovill and Bulley’s (2011) co-production ladder as was anticipated.

2.4 Co-operative performance

Iversen & Stavnskaer Pedersen's (2017) fourth step is the enactment of the prototype which was previously developed. This stage is the action stage, where ideas are given life. The performances in this case were in the form of 12 two-hour sessions in both learning environments: campus and prison.

On campus, the sessions were expected to be delivered face-to-face, and all the preparation had this mode of delivery in mind. The prototype established with the students became the formal module structure, and each academic involved took over the required number of sessions in harmony with specific expertise.

The Module structure was very clear on Moodle, the open-source learning platform used by the university. Everyone enrolled on the module, student and academic, had access to the full international criminal justice Moodle page, which was updated regularly by the teaching team. Students were encouraged to interact with this page prior to each lecture, and it was made sure that any pre-readings, activities, and anything specifically requested by the students were uploaded and shared which opened the path for active learning and more discussion in the sessions. For example, prior to the comparative penology module, students needed to come prepared with information and thoughts about any global prison system. To give them a starting point links to various websites, like the World Prison Brief and the Global Prison Trends reports, were uploaded. This encouraged students to look at different systems and then chose specific ones which piqued their interest. This seemed to work, and one student commented how prisons closer in distance seemed to have similar numbers and regimes. Since students do not have editing rights on Moodle, to eliminate the obstacles to co-creative learning caused by a one-way stream of content sharing, a shared folder on the cloud was created. Everyone was given access and invited to upload any research or literature which they came across and wished to discuss further in the lectures. A structure according to the themes co-created earlier was created on the cloud folder. This gave students free access to edit and upload anything they wished. The aim was for students to upload their chosen material prior to the session, in preparation for a discussion on theory and practice which stems from their research. Unfortunately, this did not work as effectively as anticipated, and it is discussed in more detail within the evaluation section.

2.4.1 Co-Creating a summative assessment

Once the teaching space was planned, another factor had to be considered within the module: the assessment. Since this module was accredited and a core part of the students' master's degree, the assessment had to be summative and therefore formal. There were two barriers to work through here. The first was Boud's (2000) admonition that HE assessments do not fully prepare students for lifelong learning and employment. Boud (2000), along with Falchikov (2005) go on to say that oftentimes HE assessment helps the students learn up to graduation rather than give them the skills to self-learn once graduated. The other barrier was an inability to co-create the assessment questions with the students, as university requirements meant that the assessment question had to be peer reviewed and finalised prior to the commencement of the academic year. Boud and Falchikov's (2005) suggestion on the need to move away from summative assessment and instead focus on more sustainable assessments needed to be a core part of the question, since these aids learners become more active in their learning with the ability to assess themselves. Furthermore, more concrete understanding of concepts and a stronger knowledge base can be created when students create both questions and answers (Draper, 2009), since higher order cognitive skills are used (Hardy et. al., 2014) by students to reflect on the learning outcomes, content discussed, personal experiences, good practice and the ever-present quest for 'solutions'. Co-creative assessments would draw on this philosophy, even though university regulations and parameters did not allow a full co-creative approach. Therefore, an authentic assessment, which encourages learning, through an Assessment for Learning (AFL) methodology (Sambell, et al., 2013) was created. AFL is rather close to the co-creative approach since it allows tutors to adjust the teaching as necessary, giving students

more opportunities to regulate their own learning (Williams, 2009). Creating an authentic assessment meant that the students would be in a better position to integrate aspects learnt within the sessions to their everyday life and employment (Wiggins, 1990). This meant that the students needed to be at the forefront of their work.

Recognising these elements, two unrestrained and very open-ended essay questions were introduced, where discussions and arguments produced by the students could be autonomous and personalised. The first question asked students to evaluate the concept of human rights in the context of different systems of criminal justice. This gave the students space to create. When reading essays, a pattern of discussions on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights most notably Articles 1, 2, 3 and 6 in relation to The Basic Principles for the Treatment of Prisoners for people behind bars was detected, however some students were bolder. One student, for example, discussed the criminalisation of abortion and the (then) current events happening in Poland in terms of how the protests were handled by the police. For the second question, the students were given an additional choice. Students were asked to critically compare either two penological practices or two policing systems. Despite the choice given, students who opted for penology essay compared England and Wales to Norway and other Scandinavian prisons. Although this was interesting, it did not illustrate student's individual choices and interests. Only two students ventured away from this, and both essays were exceptional: one student discussed African and Italian prisons and the other one prisons within the United Arab Emirates. Upon reflection, it seemed like students had no direct experience within prisons and the penology system, so found it harder to engage with move away from their comfort zone within the area. This conclusion provided another rational for a prison-university partnership since the lived experience of those currently within the system would provide the stepping-stone needed for a more in-depth understanding of a prison system. On the other hand, the university students would give the students behind bars insights into the system from the other side.

Moving into prison, the setting here was more flexible, as sessions were not regulated by any institutional policies (apart from the regular prison security), and there was no need for a solid script on paper to be reviewed and agreed to prior to the commencement of the programme. This programme behind bars was based on an artistic approach. From the needs analysis it was established that the need for soft skill coaching was paramount and concluded that an approach through the arts would be the most effective and co-creative in this environment. The training programme at the prison was run over 12 sessions of 2 hours each by qualified art educators. The mediums of drawing, painting, printmaking, and photography were used. Art was used as a vehicle to reach learners and delve deeper into their socio and personal needs. The programme focused on active and individual learning through creativity, experimentation, technique, and problem solving. An underlying concept within the whole programme was collaboration, which is an aspect of the soft skills training put in place, and an essential aspect to co-creativity. During the introductory session, students were told about the concept of co-creativity, the outcomes to be achieved and were introduced to various art mediums. It was established that the sessions should be divided into three inter-linked phases. The first phase was five sessions long and focused on self-expression using visual elements. One effective task here was when students were given an outline of a horse and they had to picture the horse as their dreams and draw how they envisage it to be when complete. One drawing which was very striking was the drawing of a Pegasus chained to a pole. The student then deeply reflected on this, admitting that he feels that he has a lot of potential and dreams, but prison is holding him down. Acknowledging this was a big step both in terms of self-reflection and in terms of communication, and other students agreed. The second phase, which was four sessions long, focused on the application of the visual elements through printmaking techniques. Here, students had to collaborate in order to create stamps which would then be shared to create individual, yet related themes, like tiles or a mosaic. The final phase, which was three sessions long, targeted self-expression through photography. Holistically, the sessions were developed around

the importance of communication skills, reasoning, and reflection. Since each phase was very neutral and independent, prisoners could navigate their own sail to focus on their individual personalities and needs. When setting up ideas for session plans, art education theorists for example Rudolph Arnheim (1974), who emphasised the importance of personal bias, intuition, and expression; Elliot Eisner (1984), who stressed the importance of art in education and illustrated the holistic cognitive benefits it provides; and Arthur Efland (2002) who states that complex and subtle forms of thinking occur when students are exposed to the arts, were given prominence. These art theorists portray a strong link between the arts and social and cognitive skills through their work, and therefore incorporating such aspects into the programme brought to the fore elements of personal change and reflection. The training of social skills falls in the category of benefits which these theorists claim is provided by the arts. Ultimately, it is based on the learner experience, where learning happens through a combination of action and reflection, oftentimes being incidental and idiosyncratic to the learner (Tusting & Barton, 2003).

2.5 Evaluation

Iversen & Stavnskær Pedersen (2017) give evaluation a two-fold arena: internal and external. Within these two environments, an external evaluation was not conducted. However, an internal evaluation was deemed to be essential, especially in terms of future interventions and the learning success for all the learners. As Allum (1990, cited in Hughes & Nieuwenhuis, 2005) explains, evaluation should be used to change attitudes and improve the operation of the project or programme. Therefore, it is important that these evaluations are more than just a tick-box process within the organisations. Rather, they needed to be a tool for more effective practice (Pinch, 2009).

Evaluating at face value, the differences between the two learning spaces are profuse, yet when looking into the deeper aspects of the learning journey, they are alive with similarities. Intrinsically, there are major parallels in the prospective aims and objectives of prisons and universities as entities. Both prisons and universities endeavour at being socially and individually transformative, with universities pursuing active global citizenship. They both aim at contributing to society through investing in people, since social transformation is achieved through individual growth (O'Grady & Hamilton, 2019). Therefore, there is a mutual requirement to instil inter- and intra-personal change in their clients. Whereas universities are obliged to serve the community in terms of educating students in preparation for the labour market, prisons have the obligation to rehabilitate and prepare prisoners for society and the eventual labour market. They both need to harmonize economic aspects with social responsibilities (Farley, & Hopkins, 2017). There were also similarities between the students themselves: both groups had their resistances, but they all wanted to have their voice heard – the students in discussions and their essays and the people in prison in their artwork. They were all present to better themselves, personally and in their career. They were both interested in 'how things are done' and each other's lived experiences, both inside and outside of the learning group; and reflections oftentimes brought discussions to the fore. Each session was engulfed with positive change and transformative learning. This is only the pinnacle of what would have been the case had both students been learning together.

Evaluating on a more applied level, throughout the respective programmes, the prison learners were more open to change and experimentation. Although initially reluctant, possibly because an art course was out of their comfort zone, the prison students gave the session a wholehearted try and the results were greater than the sum of the parts. On the other hand, the higher education side to the co-creative learning was not as effective as anticipated. However, part of this reason was an unexpected and uncontrollable situation in the form of the COVID-19 global pandemic which broke out in 2019. Due to the high mortality and infection rates, nations were at a stand-still for months at a time. Lockdowns were imposed on whole countries and people were legally obliged to stay at home to protect themselves and others.

In addition to the various mental health, economic and personal problems such an event brought with it, the negative effects on education were severe. Face to face teaching was stopped,

and all lectures suddenly had to be delivered via online platforms. When the first lockdown in England and Wales was relaxed in August 2020, the university planned for a mixed delivery approach. As a core module, this module was set to be delivered on campus. However, when teaching had to suddenly go online again in November 2020, the module was still running. Up until that point, students were engaged, bringing their own readings, ideas, and debates to campus. Students participated in lectures, asking well-informed questions, and discussing various concepts. Both points illustrated that there was an active interest and students were researching and reading before each session. There was open discussion about topics and concepts which were not on the reading list or on Moodle, which clearly showed that the students did drive the discussions, at least for a while. For example, one student started off a discussion on prison education and human rights, posing the question if it was fair that students in the community had to pay thousands of pounds for a degree, with some people in prison getting it for free through grants. It was evident that students were bouncing ideas off staff and peers regularly, bringing discussions about potential dissertation topics too. This was very much in line with what was expected from these sessions. When the role of an educator is fluid, transitioning between, what McWilliam (2008) calls a 'sage-on-stage' to 'guide-on-the-side', a third role of a 'meddler-in-the-middle' is created (McWilliam, 2008). This third space allows educators and students to co-create effectively through a two-way stream where educators provide theory and springboards for students to discuss and apply.

Despite this real time and live interactivity, there was a significant reduction in online interactions, even though they were reminded of the importance of their input on several occasions. This lack of online interaction was a clear indication that there was a great discrepancy between face-to-face and online interactivity and participation. In fact, when all teaching went online and this physical space was torn down, it took student engagement and motivation along with it. By that time, only five two-hour sessions were delivered, so there was still a way to go to forming a clear global picture. Despite all attempts at keeping participation during a synchronous online session animated, students did not participate, and after a couple of sessions students did not turn their cameras or microphones on even if they did attend. After a couple of weeks, it was not just participation that dwindled, attendance did too.

This lack of participation and attendance was concerning and disconcerting, especially since the students knew that guest speakers from around the globe were invited to speak to them, which should have made their sessions more practical and applied; a point and suggestion they made themselves. To further illustrate the lack of online cooperation and activity, when inquiring about online attendance via email, only one student responded to this attempt at communication. Even though it was unknown why students were not attending or participating, this issue seemed to have become a norm in various courses and universities with McKenna et al (2022) concluding that attendance, engagement, and motivation patterns all decreased when teaching moved to remote delivery.

Further decreasing motivation was the fact that some students were rather resistant to the open-ended and nonprescriptive assessment questions. They felt that they did not have enough guidance since the essay questions were not specific enough. Summative assessments are usually norm-referenced and formalised (Herrington & Herrington, 1998) therefore this is potentially what students were more accustomed to. However, critics of such assessments such as Gardner (1992) have asserted that they are not sensitive to cultural and individual differences and rather than test students on ability and understanding, just rank them according to grades. Despite such a rationale for a more non-formalised essay question, the changes to the approach and design could have created feelings of uncertainty and vulnerability for students due to the change of strategy required. The baseline formula of familiar stimulus triggering a familiar response is replaced with experimentation and risk (Iversen & Stavnskaer Pedersen, 2017). Students did not seem to appreciate this change in strategy, even though one-to-one meetings to discuss their ideas and options for the essays were offered. Halfway through the module, more guidance was uploaded onto Moodle for the students to follow, for example

providing ideas on what could be discussed in their work and what to look out for. This gave them a more defined structure for their work, but also meant that they would consider less areas and aspects, and instead play it safe and follow the guidance given. Ultimately, the similarities between each essay were as high as similarities within any other prescriptive assessment question. For example, most students who chose the penology option discussed prison systems in Scandinavian countries and the United States.

Evaluation of the prison sessions was just as challenging, albeit for different reasons. Tutors asserted that assessing and evaluating soft skills is not as simple as a Likert scale or easily perceivable elements and observations. Soft skills are difficult to define, measure, and evaluate (AbuJbara and Worley, 2018). In fact, a tutor delivering the sessions stated that ‘experience has shown us that art education is not only about the acquisition of skills, but other soft skills and other personal development skills which are difficult to validate instantly.’ However, attendance here was not an issue. This can be seen and interpreted from two angles: initially, some learners were coerced by prison authorities to attend the sessions, even though this was highly discouraged. As expected, when attendance is forced, an element of resistance, disruption and lack of motivation was experienced, especially during the first session. This coercion was unexpected as the norm in Malta is that prison officers do not encourage education and self-growth (Scalpello, 2022). Nonetheless, as the sessions developed, tutors could see that the participants were there because they wanted to be. They took an active interest in the sessions, and by the end of the programme, visible changes could be seen by the tutors. Tutors mentioned that the atmosphere within the settings was very relaxed and pleasant, and students were jovial and cooperative. Therefore, tutors did see a positive difference in the way the learners worked together. Mutual respect was evident, with increasing levels of understanding as the sessions progressed. Moreover, the tutors saw an increase of self-awareness and self-control from the learners, which was evident in the artwork they produced. This was also witnessed through the level of reflection, for example when a student discussed his family and all the changes in behaviour needed to be incorporated to win his children’s trust back. There was a very positive working environment within the sessions, and learners participated and were very open about their thoughts, feeling and aspirations.

Having such positive feedback does not mean that the programme did not encounter any difficulties. There was some frustration in terms of getting through to the prison itself, where the officials seemed to discount the programme. Therefore, time and energy were utilised to get the programme going within the prison. This was exacerbated by limitations in material and supplies which could be brought to the sessions. However, such logistical barriers are more easily overcome than participant resist is.

3. Discussion and Implication for Prison Educators

The co-creative approach to learning is explored by means of action projects in two different settings, postgraduate learning in higher education and soft skills learning in prisons. The co-creative approach has proven value in the two settings. This offers an underlying and unifying pedagogy to the development of prison-university partnerships.

The potential of such a co-creative partnership will illustrate a significant adherence to the Council of Europe’s (1990) Recommendations for Prison Education, giving prison educators a tangible ‘what works’ way forward in teaching and learning. An initiative could follow rules two, fourteen, fifteen and sixteen. Rule two makes it clear that prison education should be comparable to education on the outside, including links to external institutions and promoting mixed groups of students. It is also stated that that, when possible, people in prison should be given the opportunity to access education outside of prison (Rule 14), if this is not possible the outside community should be involved as much as possible (Rule 15). Furthermore, measures should be taken to ensure prisoners are able to continue education upon release (Rule 16). Since a partnership would allow students in prison to study with those in the community, a continuous flow of cooperation and comparability will be present, either through release on temporary license policies for people in prison to access campus, or through the invitation of the

university students into a prison classroom, creating a mixed group of students. Furthermore, prison educators will be given the chance to include the normality principle into programmes, where people in prison are progressively given more time in the community.

This will also allow the prison educator to access resources from the community, both in terms of different pedagogies but also tangible resources like university courses, programmes, and online material. This will also give access to a well-stocked library through university eBooks (Rule 10). In line with Rule 7, through such a cooperation, prison educators can develop programmes which ensure that prison education adopts appropriate teaching and learning methods for adult education. The co-creative aspect of this partnership will further cement the applicability and person-centeredness of the education since it would have been created through active cooperation. Aspects of technology and higher-level learning will also be stronger through a partnership (Rule 6). Prison educators will work with higher level digital skills, including secure access to the internet, through intranets like Moodle and through distance learning courses. Done through collaboration with HEIs, prison-university partnerships as models are very learner-centred, participatory, and interactive (Gray & Ward, 2019). Learning is said to be transformative when it is dynamic in the sense that the student alternates between different frames of reference, as well as a new lens with which to view the world. Therefore, when community students learn with students in prison, these frames of reference and different lived experience are given context. Students will be able to experience ‘the other’ rather than passively read about places and spaces, opening the doors for a deeper understanding, empathy, and recognition. Moreover, when different groups work together, they use their collective knowledge to problem solve better by either cueing each other’s prior knowledge on a shared concept (Harris et al., 2011) or complementing each other’s unique knowledge (Johansson et al., 2005). This aids effective learning as well as reflecting cultural diversity (Rule 2).

A longer-term sustainable objective of the programme would be the building of confidence in education, having succeeded when this was not possible prior, opening more doors for further education upon release. Therefore, as rule 4 states, prison educators will have the opportunity to co-create strategies for education in prison in collaboration with outside agencies promoting reintegration post release. Furthermore, learning is constantly evolving, with interchangeable and interlinked roles between the teachers and students (Taylor, 1998), which gives prison educators opportunity to instil life skills to enable better resettlement into society after release (Rule 13), for example through soft skills. In turn, this develops the whole person (Rule 3) through life skills and behaviour. This brings a higher level of transformative learning, where prison educators can help enable personal change through the alternative frames of reference brought by the university students. Moreover, when students in prison are given more autonomy in terms of the co-creative approach, prison educators could mould this into other aspects of the individual’s life to bring more self-efficacy and stronger decision-making skills. Finally, a university course, even if it is not a complete degree, will provide learners with an accredited certification which is a way towards a better chance at employment too.

Partnerships also provide the potential of undermining the public perceptions that revolve around the very practice of incarceration, which is another longer-term effect, where three predominant assumptions are challenged: the concept of ‘bad people’, that prison is a choice based on one’s actions and that some people simply get what they deserve (Lewen, 2014, p. 353).

To conclude, taking Iversen & Stavnskaer Pedersen’s (2017) from a different angle, this article could be seen to reflect the first three stages (framing/contextualising, finding the question, and co-designing micro-prototypes) of their progression. The discussions could be seen as a plan for future implementation of a prison-university partnership using methods discussed and reflected on, or it can be a starting point for future research. Within the UK context, this is not entirely new, as such partnerships are already in place, for example through the PET and the Open University, however in the Maltese landscape this would be a new and much-needed endeavour, benefitting both society and the prison.

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