

“It’s About Whose Voices Matter and What That Means”: Reflections on Insider/ Outsider Status in Prison Classrooms

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Abstract: *Based on the author’s experience of teaching on a higher education project in two English prisons—one for men aged 18–30 and one for women aged over 21—the article considers how critical reflection on prison norms encourages authenticity and respect in the classroom. These elements provide a foundation for students to negotiate conflicting subject positions and meanings and build critical thinking skills. Both prisons and universities are risk averse and bound by structured approaches to risk and authority that may impact the development of such relationships. The author reflects on how conflicts and collaboration in both classrooms were mediated through the her status as a former prisoner, and how that offered opportunities to disrupt notions of expertise, authority and authenticity in productive—if sometimes uncomfortable—ways.*

Keywords: *Prison education, University–Prison Partnership (UPP), Critical Reflections*

Education and training in English prisons focuses predominantly on basic skills and vocational training (Coates 2016) and is often of poor quality. In 2018, 54% of prisons’ education provision was rated as inadequate or requiring improvement (Coffey 2018). Attempts to reframe education as rehabilitative (Champion and Noble 2016) are reflected in the emergence of University–Prison Partnerships (UPPs) (Prisoners’ Education Trust, n.d.). This article draws on the author’s experience teaching UPPs in two prisons, named Woodfield and Lowsight¹ and includes reflection and research-based observations throughout. Motivation for participating in UPPs varied between prison and university learners, and indeed the prison and university. For prison learners, a classroom that offers “higher” education can be a site of resistance just as university can be (Pathania 2018). Resistance could be as subtle as calling each other by their first names (as prison staff often refer to prisoners by surname).

While the US has an established tradition of taking college students and trainee teachers into prisons (Dell’Angelo 2014; Armstrong 2015; Dreisinger 2015), “co-learning” between university and prison students is relatively new in the UK.² This novelty, coupled with the reformative objectives of prison education, means UPPs risk complicity in sustaining carceral ideology and the “improvement” of students through participation in higher education (Armstrong 2015). Uncritical reproduction of carceral norms may be part of that complicity. For example, prisons usually require prisoner learners to have completed basic skills to the highest available level.³ Universities, understandably, accept this as a measure of ability and interest but gaining these qualifications is fraught with obstacles. Education routinely pays less than other work (Coates, 2016), classes are often cancelled, and results are not always recorded so programmes have to be repeated. In frustration, many give up. By upholding this measure of basic skills, universities can unwittingly replicate the exclusion of standard prison education.

The Course

The course was designed by the author and aimed to introduce social science through action research,



over twelve weekly sessions. Twenty learners—ten each from the prison and the university—were invited to explore the role of expertise and power relations in the prison and the classroom and develop their critical thinking skills. Learners would deliver their findings as a presentation to an invited audience of prison and university staff and family members. Prison students would have the option to complete an Extended Project Qualification, which could support an application to college or a foundation degree. There was no basic skills requirement, and the course was designed to accommodate a wide range of skills, including verbal and visual assignments. The course was developed and delivered by the author and included sessions with practitioners and academics, many of whom had been imprisoned. Prison students were enrolled at the library and could request books in their own name. All were given university branded stationery, pens and bags. This was intended as practical—prisons do not usually provide pens or paper for learners to use outside the classroom—but it contributed to a connectedness within the group. The following section includes reflections on the course at Woodfield and then Lowsight.

Reflections

HMP Woodfield (According to Field Notes From December, 2016)

Today's session begins with a discussion on "being strange" (Morris 2016). The class is a mixture of undergraduates (mostly female and one male) and prisoners (all male). They come to be known as "the girls and Steve" and "the boys".⁴ It's the first day and the desks are arranged in a horseshoe. The boys have spread out so that when the girls and Steve arrive, they sit between them. The atmosphere is friendly and polite. We set out some rules for the group—the boys suggest "listening, respect for each other and no sexual banter". The girls and Steve ask that everyone participates. My rule is that all words are permissible, except "offender".⁵ The boys nod in agreement, although it means little to the girls (although Steve gets it, having been in prison himself).

The university students have been briefed on prison rules and conduct, including not sharing personal information—not writing their surnames on the attendance list, not talking about where they were from or asking such questions of prison students. This unravels on the first day at Woodfield. Explaining the rule to the group, the prison students point out my surname on the course materials. The boys were known, to staff and each other, by their surnames. Furthermore, the prison students will be enrolled with the university to enable them to borrow from the library and access education support on release. They ask "what do you think we're going to do with your surnames?" creating an immediate tension. Uncritically maintaining the rule would detract from the value of co-learning and from the aims of the course—and so begins twelve weeks of questioning everything.

I had never intended to tell "my story", but it quickly feels dishonest not to—after all we are here to learn—together—about the complexities of human knowledge and experience? I share it in a session on "what is expertise?" Later Simon tells me that it mattered to him that he could talk to me "on a level". Amir says it shows him that you can still achieve things after being in prison.

The research topic is prison education and how it might be improved. The boys are lively and engaged. At times they lack the vocabulary to dissect ethics or reflexivity (although so do the girls) but once explained they provide copious examples from prison life. I steer us away from too much "prison talk" because I want the classroom to be a refuge from it, a space that is different from the other prison classrooms the boys have told us about. Admittedly this is difficult to maintain when the door is unlocked and thrown open mid-way through the session, an officer bellowing "toilet!". The end of the session is much the same, boys hurried out, slow leavers threatened with sanctions. Travelling home each week, I reflect on the hopelessness of a learning space from which some students are herded aggressively, to be locked in on arrival to the wing. Then one week, the students surprise me. They no longer want to produce research that might benefit the prison. They have, in their own words, become critical thinkers and they want instead to make a statement about everything that is wrong with the prison system, from their experience. This means there might be nothing to show for twelve weeks' work, but I wanted them to question everything. I meet with prison staff and Louise, my manager. Louise is worried that not producing a report means we won't be invited back. She thinks a statement might seem confrontational, political even. I feel proud that the students have taken this path - I wanted them

to question everything. Prison *is* confrontational, it *is* political. It sounds glib but this is the students learning the pen is mightier than the sword. Isn't that why we're doing this? Prison staff want to remove someone who they think is too influential, but I argue for him to stay—he is influential, but removing him will turn the group against the project.

HMP Lowsight(According to Field Notes From October 2017)

New prison, new students - inside and out. Lowsight holds women over 18. 60% of the inside students and all of the outside students (all women) are under 25. With no *boys* we're no longer *girls*—the students made that clear.⁶ In time we lose one student to open prison, one to a cookery class (she gets to eat what she cooks, who can compete with that?) and one to the pressure inside her own head; at the start of a life sentence, it's too much.

Instead of setting a rule about personal information, we discuss as a group what is and is not acceptable. We agree that asking personal questions should be avoided, but sharing is ok if the person is comfortable. We also agree that confidentiality in the room is important.⁷ This time I tell my story at the start. It resonates but not always in ways I anticipate. One day, Adaeze says angrily “we're not all middle-class white women who got done for drink driving”. That's not me so why do I feel it so personally? As at Woodfield, there's a lot of prison talk, but here the women are mainly concerned with the intersection of criminalisation, race and gender. Few of them know women who have been in prison (although some know lots of men who have). They feel their otherness and we talk often about what it means to be a woman. The prison students seem concerned with letting the university students know they are the same as them. They needn't worry, there are many similarities, deeper than the “same area” connections of Woodfield: Two students from the same Somali tribe, shared experiences of being in care, or excluded from school, of racism or of being raised by lone fathers and finding their own femininity. Although different from them in many ways—older, white—the fact that I share the experience of both university and prison disrupts expectations, and that somewhat dissolves other barriers.

Later, Adaeze tells me about another prison-university partnership she is part of. The class is more formal and structured than ours—she prefers that in some ways. A university student in that class tells her their training included “not sharing personal information”. Adaeze finds this insulting and uncomfortable, it makes the classroom feel like jail whereas our class feels like outside.

Discussion

UPPs are couched in terms of breaking down barriers, finding common ground between people of different backgrounds and creating the potential for individual and social transformation (Armstrong and Ludlow 2016). Prison classrooms can be sites of safety—an “island” where teachers are not aware of offences and students can be themselves (Nichols 2017). Students at Woodfield and Lowsight would disagree—many found education infantilising and dull. They wanted more choice, opportunities to gain recognisable qualifications and more interactivity with teachers and other students—to work in groups. They wanted to be challenged, and to have the chance to challenge others' perceptions of them. The classroom as a nexus between prison and university is a particular dialectical space where the overarching goals of each institution are in tension. The space is held by dialogue among and between students and teacher. Questioning norms together—even in such mundane ways as talking about where we were from, or referring to ourselves as women, not girls—and creating solutions was a way to make education more fulfilling. This author is not alone in having lived in prison as well as teaching there, nor in using her experience to contribute to scholarship (Earle 2014; Honeywell 2018; Reisz 2017) but the effects of a prison-experienced teacher in prison are under-explored.

A teacher with experience of imprisonment disrupts conventional prison (and university) norms of legitimacy and requires governors and administrators to be open-minded. Universities are perhaps even more cautious than prisons about academics with convictions (Earle 2018, 2011) and the support of the university provides an example to prison (and indeed university) students about what is possible for themselves and for others. It is a challenge to the stigmatisation of prisoners and the framing of them (us) as in need of reformation. In that way it somewhat guards against the risk of the university replicating this formulation. Self-disclosure

is key, but it's not enough to simply announce it; as Adaeze pointed out, not every prisoner has the same story. "Lived experience" is not inherently valuable, it is simply another tool in the pedagogical toolbox. I was more comfortable with conflict, with "failing" to produce a report, than university colleagues, more familiar with the reasons why a prospective student may not have a level 2 certificate. Criminalisation and imprisonment are stigmatising, and the resultant spoiled identity (Goffman 1963) arguably makes us aware of our incompleteness. Awareness of incompleteness, says Freire, is a necessity of an authentic approach to education (1970). The (inevitably flawed) attempt to be fully human is sometimes uncomfortable—sharing information about ourselves, accepting that our carefully designed programme may not realise its aims, these are uncomfortable positions, especially for a teacher, someone usually positioned as an authority figure. A prison classroom creates its own discomforts, but then again, a university can—perhaps should—do the same. Supporters of prison-university teaching talk up the benefits to students: breaking down barriers, questioning assumptions. I suggest that teaching outside of our comfort zone is at least as valuable.

In challenging the norms—and being heard—prisoner students felt respected, and in turn showed respect to each other and the space. In Woodfield this included an absence of arguments, fights or "incidents". Students reported this as unusual—especially as they had not known each other before the course began—and the staff confirmed it. Was it just that the students who attended were well behaved? Not necessarily; several were described by staff as "challenging and disruptive" and two were on basic⁸ for most of the course.

Conclusion

The author's commitment to a learning environment that does not "feel like jail" was influenced by personal experience of both prison education and higher education and the resultant belief that learning should be empowering. This commitment came alive when the boys at Woodfield decided they no longer wanted to write the report on education because "why should we do something for them?" After heated debate and discussion with the girls (and Steve), they decided instead that they would write a statement and present it at the graduation event. This was not entirely unproblematic; the university and prison administration were concerned that this threatened the success of the course. As a group we negotiated a solution—the students would present their statement, but would also talk about how they experienced the course. This included surprise at their own intelligence, a desire to study further, a new understanding of the constraints they faced, and a recognition that university might just be a place for them. Three students applied for foundation degrees, and the course is now a regular part of Woodfield's education provision, with two original students as mentors. At Lowsight, two students applied for deferred entry to degree programmes.

The success of any educational setting is determined by the relationships between those who facilitate and participate in it. Boundaries can protect and support participants but uncritical acceptance of received wisdom around mutual self-disclosure can hinder the possibility of real learning. The author's status as a former prisoner acted as a catalyst for questioning the nature of risk and authenticity and enabled learners on both sides to think critically about imprisonment and their own futures. The process of criminalisation and imprisonment create a double consciousness, where an individual is forced to see themselves through the eyes of others. That is not to say that teachers without lived experience cannot achieve the same effect, but that they must consciously find ways to disrupt rather than reproduce prison and university norms of whose voice matters and what that means.

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Footnotes

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

² Although there is a history of academics going into prisons to teach (Cohen and Taylor 1972; Armstrong and Ludlow 2016).

³ Level 2 is roughly equivalent to the level students have attained on completion of compulsory education in England and is the highest level that can be obtained in prison, without external funding.

⁴ These terms are theirs, for they are of course, not boys, or girls, but young men and women. In another context the terms might be insulting, but here they seemed to create a sense of community.

⁵ The term offender, once preferred as softer than convict or prisoner, has become tainted with managerialism and exclusion, positioning crime as the entirety of a person's being, cementing them as different from others. As the "official" label it also has authoritarian overtones that the boys recognised but that the girls were unaware of. McNeill and Weaver have argued that language itself can frustrate desistance from crime (although they continue to use the term offender). Banishing it was intended to signal that the classroom was a place of equality.

⁶ Women in prison are often referred to as "girls" by staff, which might have contributed to the Low-sight students' disdain.

⁷ Excepting a disclosure that indicates at risk of harm, which would be shared appropriately.

⁸ The lowest privilege level.

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