



**Morgan, C. and Simpson, E. (2015) 'Creative collaborations: a case study', *Knowledge Exchange in University Prison Partnerships*, Bath Spa University, UK, 15 November 2015.**

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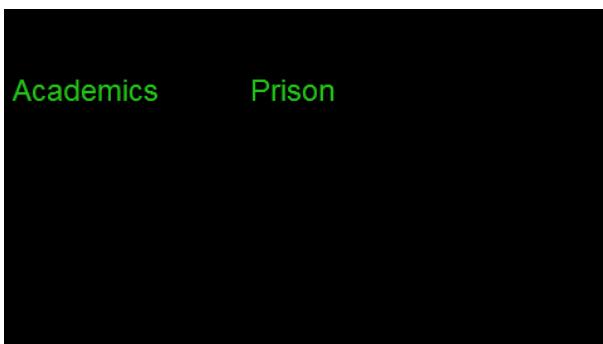
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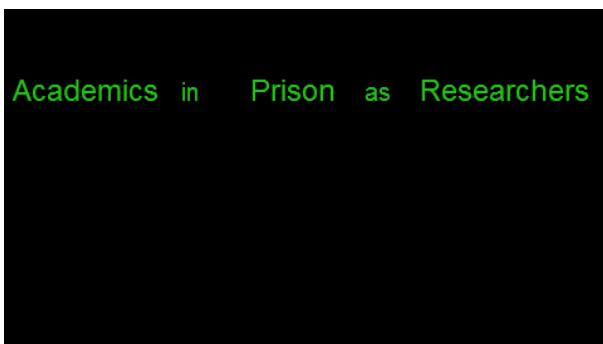


So over the course of the next twenty minutes we will talk about our experience of designing, delivering and exhibiting a project called CrimeWaves, which was a collaboration between Bath Spa University and a closed female prison. Before discussing the project further, I want to offer a brief contextualisation concerning the potential benefits of such collaborations.

The main suggestion I want to make here is that collaboration can offer the potential for a wider range of benefits than is generally assumed, that there is a matrix of benefit that interacts in complex ways. It's tempting to frame the potential gains in terms of how they will accrue to the key sponsors. So...



...there are academics and prisons. Which gives us academics in prison doing research.

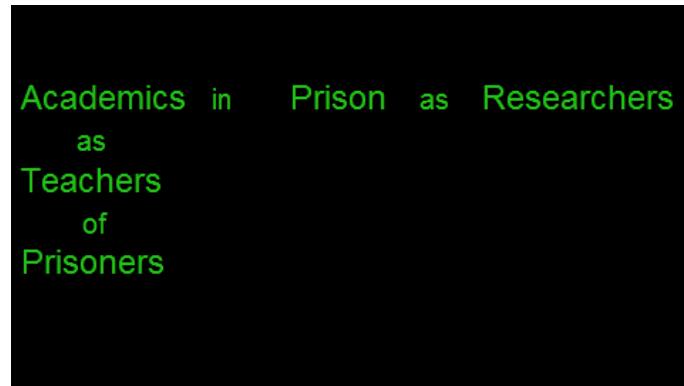


The immediate benefit here being for the researcher, who is given direct and relatively unproblematic access to a contained and controlled population. As Dave Downs and Paul Rock describe it:

**"Captives are neatly assembled samples requiring little pursuit...prisons... are convenient warehouses" for researchers. (Downes and Rock, 2007)**

There may be longer term benefits for the prison in terms of dissemination of research findings. But there might not. And at the more immediate operational level, researchers can be seen as much as problems as solutions. We can take up scarce resources, do stupid things that impact on the smooth running of the regime and at the end of the day our findings may prove unhelpful. So why let us in in the first place?

The key benefit for prisons can be seen in terms of the additional teaching capacity that partnerships bring;



Academics as teachers in prisons and through the gate.

And this benefit addresses a frequently noted and increasing gap in prison education provision where the vast majority of education is targeted at getting the highest number of prisoners through the lower levels of qualifications, in what the Prison Learner Alliance have memorably termed the 'bathtub' effect (PLA, 2013).

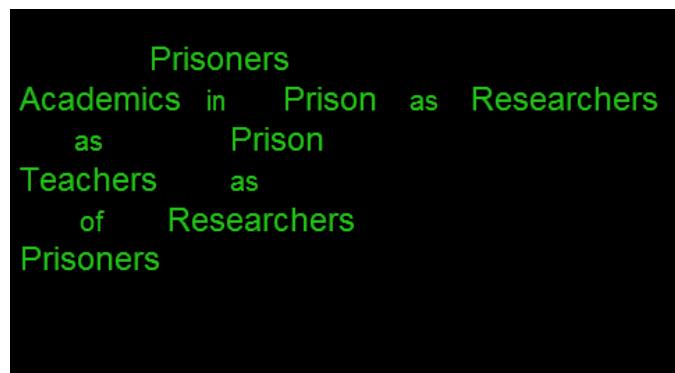
However, while there is much to be valued in this kind of collaboration, which very clearly increases educational opportunities for prisoners, there is a danger that both these notions of collaboration; academics as researchers and as teachers in prisons may serve to reinforce and reproduce the power dynamics of prisoners as 'other', as a subject to be studied or as a student to be taught. Less a matrix of benefit and more the same old linear story in which, as Andrew Coyle has noted:

**"...the ethos of prison remains one in which prisoners are treated as passive respondents rather than active participants." (Coyle, 2012)**

The emerging field of convict criminology disrupts this view and since the late 1990s prisoner and former prisoner scholars, in collaboration with a number of non-cons, have been developing an 'insider' criminological perspective which aims to:

**"challenge misrepresentations of crime, prisons, the criminal justice system and particularly prisoners and former prisoners" (Aresti et al., 2012)**

This allows us to turn the story on its head, so we have:



prisoners as researchers and...

Prisoners  
Academics in Prison as Researchers  
as Prison  
Teachers as  
of Researchers  
Prisoners as Teachers of Communities

... prisoners as teachers. And this represents a very clear benefit for prisoners, but also for the institutions that support them. Former prisoners, who become teachers are imbued with amazing potential to educate far beyond the confines of the prison and indeed the lecture theatre, because their own experiences serve to challenge the misconceptions of the wider public about the irredeemable 'otherness' of offenders.

These benefits, which stem from working with prisoners as active participants, shift emphasis away from the policy-led priorities of the Seven (or Nine) Pathways to Reducing Reoffending, of which Employment Training and Education is key, and focus instead on the strengths-based approaches developed by desistance researchers. They resonate particularly with two key findings of this research, the first of which suggests that the individuals most likely to stop offending have an inflated sense of their own ability to influence circumstances. What better way to do that than to collaborate in academic research as an equal partner?

Secondly, there is an increasing acknowledgement that stopping offending isn't just about changing your own mind but about the wider community changing its mind about you, and thereby increasing chances of former prisoners reintegrating back into their communities - which relates back to this idea that prisoners who go on to become educators can't help but educate public opinion by challenging stereotypes.

This is all good, as far as it goes. Benefits for prisons, for universities, for prisoners and the wider community in terms of reductions in reoffending. This represents a kind of circle of virtue in which all these benefits feed one into another - however the danger is this circle becomes a self referential one, in which mainstream research priorities set the agenda for further research, which whether supportive or critical is still focused on the same issues. And this is where the creative component of collaboration comes in. Leading to...

Prisoners Artists  
Academics in Prison as Researchers  
as Prison Researchers  
Teachers as  
of Researchers  
Prisoners as Teachers of Community

...artists as researchers and...

Prisoners Artists  
Academics in Prison as Researchers  
as Prison Researchers as  
Teachers as Artists  
of Researchers  
Prisoners as Teachers of Community

...researchers as artists, not to mention the potential...

Prisoners as Artists  
Academics in Prison as Researchers  
as Prison Researchers as  
Teachers as Artists  
of Researchers  
Prisoners as Teachers of Community

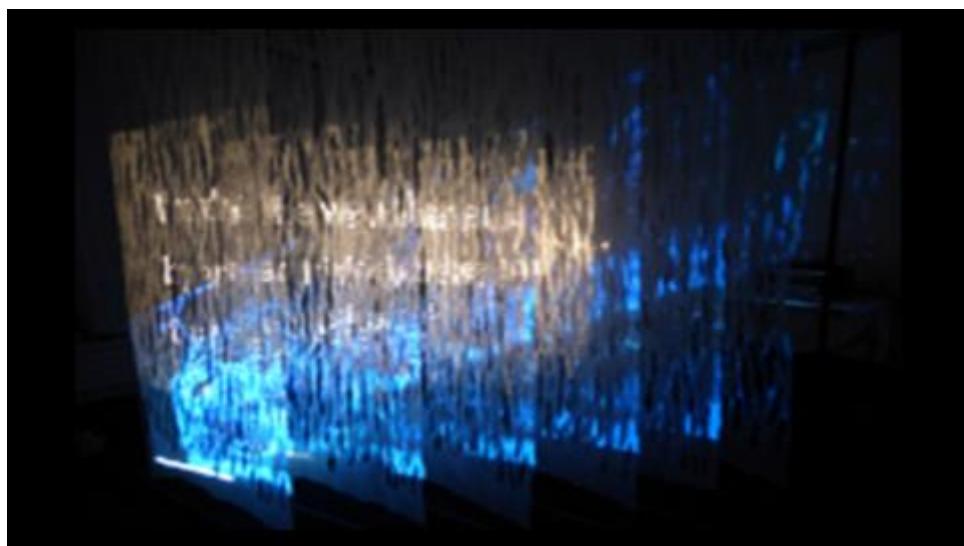
...prisoners as artists.

CrimeWaves was the name given to an immersive, multimedia installation commissioned as part of Bath Spa University's launch event for the opening of their new academic building in 2014. The theme of the overall event was 'water' which was just about as divergent as it's possible to get from prisons unless you go back to the hulks, however the thing about creative thinking is it will always lead you back to the original subject, but often via unexpected routes and lead to unexpected discoveries along the way. So, crime waves and tides of moral panic was the starting point, and then I started to think about getting beneath these headlines to the individual stories of crime, to, as we wrote in the initial proposal:



"capture the flow of narrative as it shifts through the lives of prisoners, victims and criminal justice staff. Collective streams of word and image, sound and vision form an immersive experience for the audience members" (Simpson and Merron, 2013).

There were two key elements to this work, the textile artist, Joy Merron created an installation which captured the visual aspects of narrative flow, and along with Masters student Megan Mackenzie I produced a soundscape which combined the stories of female prisoners, victims and workers in criminal justice.



Prisoners' stories were at the core of this project and we were incredibly fortunate to be given permission to interview a group of female prisoners who Ella had worked with on previous projects. It took an awful lot of hard work by prison staff and governors to make this a possibility, and indeed, the approval was a 'one-performance only' deal, which is why this case study is anonymised.

Both Ella and myself and the prison were very clear that there must be benefit for the women involved and it was agreed that the finished installation would be exhibited for a day inside the prison, where all the women would be given an opportunity to view it. In addition any woman from the smaller group who contributed interviews, and who were eligible for Release on Temporary Licence would be invited to the gala event at Bath Spa University. The whole group of interviewed women were also offered a taster education session which explored ideas around prison education and the experience of being a woman both inside and outside of

prison. This session introduced processes of sociological enquiry, but not simply as an exercise in academic study, rather as a series of tools which the women could use to think differently about their own circumstances and they applied this learning in a series of interactive exercises. A case of education not just as set text, but as context. This session was offered with a view to a longer term education partnership between the prison and the university.

The interviews, which we conducted with a total of five prisoners, four workers and four victims of crime were designed to the rigorous standards of social scientific research and consisted of a semi-structured interview schedule containing 12 questions. The content of the questions, however, was far from standard and were designed to elicit answers that got below the dominant narratives of criminality produced by mainstream criminological research. This refers back to the idea that research becomes self-referential, that even research that engages from a critical perspective can reproduce the same factors through the process of argumentation, and this may in turn bleed through into the narratives of those closest to crime. There are many examples of this in the literature and even a book that explicitly commits to:

**“give value, exposure and intrinsic credibility to the inside account of the convict” (Crew and Bennett, 2013)**

is structured around previous findings on social background and the typical dimensions of carceral concern. So, what happens if we change the questions, move away from factual data collection to more impressionistic, non-sequential memories and what happens if we introduce the metaphoric, if we ask:

- If you were a type of weather, what type of weather would you be?
- Describe any five minutes that's a usual part of your day.
- Tell me about a time of laughter or tears.
- If you were a kind of water what kind of water would you be and why?

And what happened was something I wasn't expecting. In my initial notes I'd described a process whereby narratives from each of the perspectives; prisoners, workers, victims would describe different trajectories around a central island of crime. I expected certain convergences, brief moments where the rivulets of experience crossed over, particularly, I thought in the stories of victims and prisoners, where a good amount of research has noted the blurring of categories (the assumptions you see are almost impossible to escape), but what I didn't expect was the sheer deluge, the ways in which the narratives flowed together time and again until it was difficult to distinguish prisoner from officer, officer from victim and most surprising of all officer from prisoner. A moment in an interview when a prison officer alluded to an early incident of abuse, another Criminal Justice worker describing personal cycles of addiction, and the insights of two prisoners whose time inside had given them the ambition and the wisdom to work with offenders after their release. And so this is what the soundscape attempted to capture; the lack of separation, the commonalities of experience, the clear narrative flow of what connected all of these women together through crime, rather than what set them apart.

Prisoners as Artists  
Academics in Prison as Researchers  
as Prison Researchers as  
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Prisoners as Teachers of Community

In terms of gauging the success of Crime Waves, it's fair to say it didn't achieve a 'matrix of benefits', this was partly a result of the limited timescale, and a frequent criticism of creative projects in prison is their ad hoc nature and lack of continuity. This is often tied up with funding restrictions, however this wasn't the case for Crime Waves, which had university support and was aligned to a potential education partnership. The second and decisive obstacle lay in continued access. The success or failure of many prison initiatives is decided on the commitment of governor grade staff willing to act as champions. And once a gatekeeper leaves, generally that gate closes. This was certainly the case for Crime Waves, and despite the best efforts of a frontline member of staff, we were unable to return to the prison with the installation.

Prisoners as Artists  
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of Researchers  
Prisoners as Teachers

Nor were any of the women allowed to attend the gala opening event, again despite the best efforts of staff members. And the prison declined to take further discussions about an educational partnership.

Prisoners as Artists  
in Prison as Researchers  
Prison Researchers as  
as Artists  
Researchers  
Prisoners as Teachers

We didn't achieve the larger partnership goals, however on a smaller scale there were a number of benefits.

We offered the women two ways in which to see their words differently. Firstly through an educational lens, making sociological concepts accessible and giving women practice in applying them to their own lives. And also in terms of the interview questions, which allowed women an opportunity to reframe their experiences through metaphor and impressionistic memory. The women engaged and responded positively to both of these exercises; women spoke to me on subsequent visits about ideas they had taken from Cath's education

session and two women in particular were very motivated by the idea of their ongoing relationship with the university (which makes our failure in this regard all the more disappointing). Women also enjoyed the experience of the interviews, where not only were they offered space to be heard non-judgmentally (noted in the wider literature as something that prisoners value) but also they enjoyed the challenge of creatively reinterpreting their lives and experience.

The benefits that come from seeing the world differently relate again to recent findings in the research into desisting from crime, which suggest that seeing your life story differently, giving events a new set of meanings can lead to a change in how you think about yourself, and of what you may be capable of achieving. This is hardly the ‘super-agency’ discussed earlier, in which people have an over-inflated sense of their ability to control circumstances, but it can be a beginning on that journey, as it opens up the possibilities of alternative futures and alternative selves.

Again, it was disappointing that the women were neither able to experience the finished installation themselves, or hear the responses of the wider community. The desistance literature emphasises the importance of final performances or exhibitions in which family, friends or other members of the community bear witness to the prisoners’ positive achievements, which is then reflected back in a more positive sense of self.

Although the women did hear and give final approval to the completed soundscape, the novelty of hearing their recorded voices and their sensitivity to what had been included from their own interviews overshadowed the possibility of recognising the bigger picture represented in their words.

The second set of benefits concern the alternative research methods uncovered by the project and though it wasn’t intended that CrimeWaves be considered as a serious piece of empirical research, the findings suggested otherwise. The sheer scale of interdisciplinary activity, involving a forensic psychologist, a criminologist, two creative arts facilitators, a filmmaker, a classical musician, a visual artist, two prison governors and 17 women all with their own sets of knowledge and expertise, and then brought together by a poet let loose in a social science department meant we were able to think about old subjects in new ways.

That said, the project heavily privileged the researcher’s perspective, no matter that this researcher happens to be a creative artist. Given more time and authorisation we would have worked with the women in a co-research capacity, specifically in terms of the editing of the soundscape, allowing the group to select and shape the final narrative of the work. And it on this point of official authorisations, as necessary as they are, where interdisciplinarity falters; where we realise there are significant differences between the disciplines of the academy and of the prison regime. If partnerships are to move forward and exploit their full potential this issue is a key one to address.

Certainly CrimeWaves offered a basic model for a different way to collect research data and to disseminate it in ways that engage the public; offering alternative understandings of crime. However, we conclude that CrimeWaves represented less of a matrix of benefit and more of a ripple effect which needs a sea change in institutional structures rather than in individual offenders for its potential to be realised.

There are Academics and Prisons. Which gives us academics in prisons as researchers.