

Project-based learning in Scottish prisons

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The article describes the development of a project-based approach to learning in seven Scottish prisons. It argues that the project-based approach is ideally suited to prison education due to its flexibility and ability to enrich the relatively narrow prison curriculum and create meaningful links with wider society, reducing the isolation of prisoners. The approach also empowers staff and encourages interdisciplinary working. The project-based approach is well placed to support and reinforce desistance-based practice in education and fits well with both the new Scottish Prison Service strategy, *Unlocking Potential, Transforming Lives* and with Scottish Government's education policy, Curriculum for Excellence.

Keywords: prison education, project-based learning, prisoner participation, arts education

The policy context

Ultimately, the way forward in prison education cannot be separated from a strategy that seeks to reform the penal system itself, and this in turn cannot be separated from the broader social and political context within which prisons have to operate. To achieve the policy and practice agendas we have outlined prisons have to stop being places where politicians can appear 'tough' and prisoners in turn have to be offered opportunities that have hitherto been denied to them. (Wilson and Reuss, 2000: 181)

If Reuss and Wilson are correct in their premise, recent developments in Scottish penal policy would seem to augur well for an ambitious and reinvigorated system of prison education in Scotland. On 18 November 2013, Colin McConnell, the recently appointed chief executive of the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) announced the publication of a new strategy, *Unlocking Potential, Transforming Lives* and spoke of a golden age for the prison service in Scotland. McConnell expressed his ambition for a service that would 'build on an individual's strengths and potential. By doing this, we will empower those in our care to unlock their potential and transform their lives' (SPS, 2013: 3).

He noted that: 'Learning and personal development within SPS has tended to focus on what can be classed as structured or formal activities. The delivery of programmes, vocational training [and] classroom-based education ... often concentrate on addressing personal, social and psychological needs (or deficits)' (SPS, 2013: 85). And he argued that this approach should be replaced with one that focuses on assets, promoting strengths and aspirations, and encouraging the development of pro-social identities. *Unlocking Potential* also recommends that:

SPS considers the potential for the transfer of responsibility of relevant community based prison services such as Education, Community Learning and Development and Prison Based Social Work to an appropriate mainstream service provider where there is assessed benefit and such

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a transfer will improve the efficient delivery of services and community and offender outcomes. (SPS, 2013: 65)

The changes heralded by *Unlocking Potential* echo the aspirations and principles of the Council of Europe report on prison education which states that:

... the education of prisoners must, in its philosophy, methods and content be brought as close as possible to the best adult education in society outside; ... education should be constantly seeking ways to link prisoners with the outside community and to enable both groups to interact with each other as fully and as constructively as possible. (Council of Europe, 1989, cited in Warner, 2007: 171)

Unlocking Potential is the most recent in a series of reports and policy papers heralding a new approach to criminal justice in Scotland. The Report of the Scottish Prisons Commission, *Scotland's Choice* (Scottish Government, 2008), highlighted 23 recommendations for the reform of penal policy. In the same year, Audit Scotland produced a report on managing increasing prisoner numbers in Scotland (Audit Scotland, 2008), and this was followed by another on reducing reoffending in Scotland (Audit Scotland, 2012). In June 2012 the Angiolini Commission on Women Offenders reported its findings recommending sweeping reforms to the treatment of women offenders (Scottish Government, 2012), and in March 2013 the Justice Committee published its *Inquiry into Purposeful Activity in Prisons* (Scottish Parliament, 2013). Together these publications represent a national commitment to change, a recognition that Scotland cannot continue to sustain its high prison population and that new approaches are needed.

It is worth noting that Justice and Education are linked in the structure of Scottish Government, with one directorate having responsibility for both areas. So when Colin McConnell came to announce his new vision he talked about the need for SPS to better align itself with the wider 'learning and justice family'. The co-existence of these two policy areas in one directorate provides opportunities to harness the contribution of prison education to 'desistance'.

Desistance is thought of by most researchers more as a process than as an event and involves 'both ceasing and refraining' from offending (Clinks, 2013: 4). A distinction is drawn between 'primary desistance' (the absence of offending behaviour) and 'secondary desistance', which 'refers to a much more deep-seated change in the person, reflected in their developing an identity and perception of themselves as a non-offender'. It is secondary desistance that is increasingly considered more important and interesting for researchers. An understanding of secondary desistance forces us away from static models of people as 'offenders', 'criminals' or 'prisoners' and encourages an understanding of change(s) in personal identities (McNeil *et al.*, 2012: 4), changes which can be encouraged and supported by good education programmes.

Education policy in Scotland was the subject of a national debate in 2002, which resulted in a review of the 3–18 curriculum and the publication in 2004 of the review group's report entitled *A Curriculum for Excellence* (Curriculum Review Group, 2004). The Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) has been rolled out in schools and colleges since August 2010 and described as the biggest overhaul of the Scottish education system since the Second World War (Garavelli, 2013). It has also been described as one of a new breed of national curriculums; a curricular model that seeks to combine top-down government prescription with bottom-up school-based curriculum development by teaching professionals (Priestley, 2010: 23). Under this model teachers are seen as agents of change and have a considerable degree of autonomy over the content and structure of learning in the classroom. Another key feature of CfE is the emphasis on interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary learning, collaborative learning, problem-based learning and action-based research. There is an emphasis on transferable skills that can be applied across different areas of knowledge, though it also acknowledges that some skills may be subject-specific.

At the same time the importance of creativity in education is acknowledged, and Creative Scotland's vision (2013: 9) is one in which: 'All children and young people will be empowered as well-rounded individuals to develop their imagination, demonstrate capacity for original thought and understanding of meaningful innovations, contributing effectively to the world at large.'

The recent developments in justice and education policy in Scotland outlined above provide a unique opportunity for prison education in Scotland. They represent a shift away from the 'risk-need' model, identified in Canada in the 1990s (Bonta and Andrews, 2007), and from curriculums designed to address *deficits* in basic skills in order to facilitate re-entry to the labour market, to a more positive desistance-based model, with an emphasis on the development of the whole person. Of course the problem of 'narrowing' in education, which sees people mainly in labour-market terms, clearly exists in the wider world beyond prisons (Warner, 2007: 1). However, while that narrowing of focus appears to be gaining ground in England and Wales, the recognition of the value of an asset-based, desistance-led approach in Scotland offers the opportunity to develop a vision for prison education which builds on some of the excellent practice to date and acknowledges the diversity of the prison population and their differing needs.

Project-based learning

The emphasis in CfE on interdisciplinary projects and studies and opportunities for personal achievement has provided a useful framework for much of the current practice in prison education. While CfE's reception in schools and colleges has been mixed it has been largely welcomed by the relatively small staff teams working in prison learning centres (from between four to nine full-time-equivalent education staff depending on the size of the prison) as providing a pedagogical framework within which to understand and reflect on existing teaching practice.

New College Lanarkshire's experience of Inspiring Change, an ambitious year-long programme of arts activities in prisons designed to test the ability of the arts to engage prisoners in learning, was another stimulus for project-based learning. The impact of Inspiring Change demonstrated that the arts had a significant role to play in raising aspirations and enlivening the curriculum, and created an atmosphere conducive to collaborative working and new ideas, encouraging and reinforcing a creative approach to the curriculum:

We present in what follows numerous examples of prisoners enthusiastically embracing the challenges that Inspiring Change programme offered them, acquiring new skills and developing an appetite for learning, discovering talents of which they and others had previously had little inkling and perhaps most significantly, reflecting on their past behaviour, future possibilities and their relationships with their families and others. (Anderson *et al.*, 2011: 7)

The experience of Inspiring Change led a group of college staff to develop an internal guide to project-based learning for prison teachers, incorporating the lessons of the evaluation and referencing CfE. While Inspiring Change highlighted the benefits of the project-based approach for prisoners – an alternative way to learn that did not remind them of negative school experiences – the benefits for staff were less well articulated. So while Inspiring Change demonstrated that projects can embed a range of basic literacy, numeracy, and IT skills, and provide opportunities for students to acquire skills such as time management, collaboration, and problem solving that are needed for work and life in the community, the aim was also to demonstrate to all teaching staff that the creativity which accompanies this way of working – involving students, seeing connections between different curricular areas, linking with outside partners – had direct benefits for their teaching practice. The aspiration was to change the attitude of learning-centre staff to project-based learning, rather than merely to increase the number of projects taking place.

The involvement of students in the process was central to the ambition. Project-based learning referred to a process in which teachers *and* students designed, planned, and carried out a project that produced a publicly exhibited final outcome such as a product, publication, or presentation, and resulted in an activity that everyone could share and celebrate. The inspiration for projects could come from many different sources. The initial spark for a project might come from a teacher's passions or indeed from a student's passion. 'The important thing is that somebody is very excited about the idea – that person's excitement is infectious' (New College Lanarkshire internal guide to project-based learning).

Partnership, or at least considering how other organizations outside the prison could help and support projects, was regarded as important. The engagement of local businesses, charities, arts organizations and local authorities all help to imbue projects with meaning and relevance and provide welcome opportunities for prisoners to engage with the outside world.

The guide issued to teaching staff included a fictional example, the Imprisoned Writers Week project, to help them formulate their own ideas (see box).

Imprisoned Writers Week

The Student Forum would like to plan and run a week of events and activities investigating the lives, experiences, and work of people imprisoned, across the world, for their writing. The project would consider imprisoned writers, historically and currently, in a range of countries. It would take place during Scottish Book Week and would engage students in all classes. The project would be featured in a future edition of *STIR*, the new Scottish prison arts magazine. It would be the first event to take place in the new library. It would therefore help to raise awareness of reading and writing and help to encourage prisoners' engagement with the library. The aim of the project is to:

- raise awareness and understanding of the issues of imprisoned writers
- promote the library through a series of book-related events
- give students opportunities to support other people in need
- support students to understand the plight of people imprisoned for their views, as opposed to crimes
- engage students in reading and writing through the study of writers with whom they will identify.

The week will be centred around visits from Scottish PEN:

- a discussion on their work and the issues of imprisoned writers
- a session with literacy learners, using a board game *Zoravia*, designed by Scottish PEN to raise awareness and understanding of the issue of imprisoned writers
- a talk and reading by an exiled Palestinian poet.

Students in the Forum will be involved in a number of learning activities:

- promoting and advertising the events in the Learning Centre and throughout the prison
- researching historical examples of imprisoned writers, such as Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, and Arthur Koestler
- presenting their findings through readings and displays
- engaging with other classes to support them to contribute to and participate in the project
- supporting students in the Learning Centre to write letters of support to imprisoned writers.

Students in other classes can be involved through:

- creative responses to the writings of imprisoned writers (Art, Creative Writing)
- research into the historical and cultural backgrounds of imprisoned writers (IT, Geography, History/Modern Studies)
- engaging with the visits from Scottish PEN and writing reports of their experiences (all)
- reading extracts from the work of imprisoned writers and commenting on them (Literacy/Communications)
- writing letters of support to imprisoned writers (all).

The example reflects well the aspirations of the new approach. The choice of theme is very outward focused. It uses the prisons as a starting point but focuses attention on the plight of others, encouraging empathy and a wider understanding of the different uses of imprisonment. It involves working with an outside group (Scottish PEN, part of International PEN, an association of writers pledged to protect freedom of expression and promote literature across frontiers throughout the world) and increases the level of contact between prisoners and outsiders via a series of visits by authors. It allows the teacher(s) to look at the issue from a series of different angles, including literature analysis, cultural history, and politics, and develops a range of skills by embedding a number of different teaching techniques: exercises, discussions, debates, interviews, reading, and writing. It also offers interest to those who are more able to look at the issue in depth and challenges them to read complex texts (Dostoevsky) without excluding those whose skills and knowledge may not be as developed. It is ambitious in its aspirations for the learners, who have importantly been involved in the design of the idea via the college's 'embryonic learner forum'.

The remainder of this article focuses on two real examples of project-based learning in New College Lanarkshire prisons. Both engage with the principles of project-based learning described above and, crucially, involve direct engagement with the world outside prison.

STIR

STIR, a creative arts magazine for prisoners, embodies all the aspects of the approach outlined above. The idea for *STIR* grew partly out of a desire to professionalize the production of prison magazines which were a feature of every learning centre but which varied considerably in quality and were published infrequently, and partly from a desire to find a meaningful outlet for prisoners' creativity that would present a positive image of prisoners to the public and to one another. Initially funded by the National Lottery Awards for All programme, the magazine went on to secure funding from Creative Scotland that enabled it to become established. Based in the long-term prison, Shotts, the magazine provides a real context for learning and the opportunity to develop a wide range of skills. It encourages consistency in teaching and learning approaches within the learning centres as well as collaboration and exchange of ideas between teachers and between prisoners. It has been highly effective in linking prisons with the wider community and presenting an alternative view of prisoners that counters that promoted by tabloid journalists. In desistance terms, involvement in *STIR* appears to generate feelings of self-worth and control as well as an altered perspective on past selves and activities, identified as important factors in distinguishing persistent offenders from those who desist (LeBel *et al.*, 2008: 136).

With the support of an inspirational teacher, an editorial board was formed at Shotts and a concept for the magazine was developed: high quality, focused on the arts, outward-looking,

celebrating and recognizing talent, communicating with wider society. Some of those involved in the editorial board had participated in the earlier Inspiring Change project¹ run by Motherwell College (now New College Lanarkshire), and its influence is clearly visible in the aspiration of *STIR*, with its focus on visual art and design, and an interest in wider cultural issues.

The commitment to quality was balanced from the outset by a desire to be fair, democratic, and inclusive. The magazine's name was selected via a competition and the editorial board received almost 500 suggestions from all seven participating prisons. The structure of the magazine was discussed and agreed by prisoners who decided on the following key elements: editorial, visual art, poetry, fiction, life writing, reviews (music, art, books), interviews, and a community section to highlight opportunities for prisoners to engage with the arts on their release. In addition, from issue 3 onwards, it was agreed that it would be helpful for each edition to be themed. The rationale for this was to encourage submissions by sparking ideas, although the themed approach has also supported the educational aspirations of the magazine. Themed issues on subjects such as urban life, environment, sport, and independence mean that teaching staff can structure and design their lessons in ways that not only provide a context for submissions to *STIR* but also allow for the acquisition of new knowledge and skills. The book review section provides opportunities to link library reading groups and literacy work in the classroom with opportunities for prisoners to publish work. The interviews allow teaching staff the opportunity to use author or other external visits as a context for developing their students' questioning, analytical, and editing skills by commissioning them to draft questions, interview visitors, and write up the conversations for submission to *STIR*. As the magazine has become established more staff are involved and linkages across the curriculum are being made.

For the forthcoming issue 7, maths students at one prison have submitted an article on the importance of mathematics in art, in which they quote one student based at HMP Low Moss: 'In the maths class when we were discussing simple Venn diagrams, it struck me that a Venn diagram could be considered more pleasing than what is currently offered up as "modern art"'. The student then explored with the teacher and the rest of the class the links between mathematics and art. The class made beautiful coloured paper models of geometric shapes (icosahedrons and dodecahedrons) which they photographed and submitted alongside their article for *STIR*. IT teachers have supported the design of submission forms which have recently been adapted to enable them to be uploaded directly to a database, allowing the editorial board to log and analyse all the submissions.

As the magazine has developed, the processes and support structures have grown and become more established. This has only been possible thanks to the support and enthusiasm of prison teaching staff, who act as *STIR* coordinators and support and encourage local editorial boards in their own prisons. These staff meet regularly as a group alongside the Shotts prisoners. They feed back on how the magazine has been received and convey ideas for future issues from their own students to the Shotts editorial board. These meetings are chaired by one of the prisoner members of the Shotts board.

In addition, there is a *STIR* strategic group consisting of individuals from various cultural and academic institutions who meet with the Shotts editorial board three times a year to discuss longer-term plans for the publication. This direct and ongoing dialogue between the prisoners and well-known and respected figures from the arts and academia provides an all-important link with the outside, and allows the prisoners to hear directly how their work is being received in the community. Praise and encouragement from the world outside the prison is motivating and encouraging. The awards from the Koestler Trust, the Scottish Print and Publishing Agency, and *The Herald* have undoubtedly reinforced the commitment of the editorial board to the magazine.

Underpinning these structures there are complex processes involving submission forms, feedback forms, disclaimer forms, a timetable for the production of the issues (three a year), an advance programme of themes, and regular newsletters to keep all the prisons informed of the editorial board's activities and developments. The prisoners administer all these processes themselves with assistance from teaching staff. The skills learnt in this context are clearly relevant to employment but also, crucially, help long-term prisoners retain agency and mature and develop by engaging with their peers and the outside world. In the context of a long-term prison, keeping these skills alive over a prolonged period of time, not allowing them to atrophy, is crucial: 'We are not static creatures, but create and develop continually. An environment that keeps us static is essentially inhumane' (Liebling, 2011 cited in SPS, 2013: 43). Similarly, Eggleston and Gehring (2000: 307) have warned of the impact of confinement on individual maturation and drawn attention to the apathy, passivity, and dependence which can result from 'institutionalization' which they characterize as 'anti-democratic'. *STIR*, with its emphasis on prisoner-led activity, attempts to counteract this 'institutionalization'.

The humanity and high principles of *STIR* shine through its editorials and the content of every issue. Many in prisons – prisoners, teaching staff and prison officials – were originally sceptical. The magazine was accused of being too highbrow and elitist. The editorial board were advised to include more puzzles and to simplify the language. These critics completely misunderstood the vision. Prisoners and teaching staff wanted to aim high, to challenge stereotypes and to show what prisoners were capable of. The cover of *STIR* makes no overt reference to prison. The intention was to create an arts magazine first and foremost. The importance of raising aspirations is highlighted by Eggleston and Gehring (2000: 309): 'High aims and high expectations facilitate improved behavior. Providing opportunities in which (prisoners) can fail – opportunities which are not available in the medical model/coercive institutional setting – establishes a 'stage' on which prisoners 'act out' their (otherwise latent) pro-social inclinations.'

Of course, the publication does not reach every prisoner, but with each issue its profile rises. More and more work is being submitted and apocryphal stories are told of prisoners reading it behind copies of the *Daily Record* so as not to lose face.

STIR now has a website (www.stirmagazine.org) to provide access to the magazine for a wider audience, in particular for prisoners' families. The editorial board is ever more ambitious in its planning. Issue 8 will focus on Independence, to coincide with the referendum, and issue 10 will be a collaboration with a Norwegian prison to highlight progressive penal practice.

At the very least, *STIR* has demonstrated what prisoners are capable of if given the opportunity, support, and encouragement. The members of the editorial board at Shotts view it as a job (though it rankles with them that their hard work is not remunerated). They take their roles seriously and feel a sense of responsibility to their contributors and readers. They meet deadlines and spend hours reading through submissions and proofreading text. They acknowledge when they have made mistakes but are fiercely protective of their editorial control. The editorial board recently wrote an article for the English prison magazine *Not Shut Up* in which they expressed what *STIR* means to them:

The creative arts provide a valuable outlet for people from all walks of life. As a template for self-expression, they provide a constructive means for expressing emotion. In an environment where time can bear down on the individual and crush the spirit, any positive activity that engages people must surely be seen as a success.

That's why we're so proud of *STIR*. (*Not Shut Up*, 2013)

Glasgow School of Art

One of the strengths of *STIR* is that it offers a permanent and sustainable context for project-based learning. The concern with developing sustainable approaches was one of the primary motivations for the establishment of a placement programme with Glasgow School of Art. Placements are an ideal mechanism for enriching the prison curriculum. They encourage interaction between the prison and the outside world and provide new learning experiences for all concerned. In the past, placements have been accommodated at the request of individual students and were not necessarily aligned with the priorities of the learning centre. We believed that a more strategic approach to placements which involved identifying specific curricular areas and institutions with whom we might develop long-term collaborations would provide greater opportunities for students and teaching staff alike.

Art is an important element of the prison curriculum, and we were keen to explore how we might strengthen the link between art and the development of other skills such as literacy and critical thinking. The visual arts have always played an important role in prisons. Their popularity is attested to by the astonishing range of work submitted every year to the Koestler Trust, which promotes prison art. However, visual art in prisons is traditionally focused on painting and drawing or, in those prisons lucky enough to have kilns, ceramics and other types of 3D work. New College Lanarkshire was keen to encourage prisoners to think more broadly about art and its significance in their lives and the lives of others, and it was for this reason that we decided to pilot a placement programme with the Department of Sculpture and Environmental Art (SEA) at Glasgow School of Art (GSA). SEA challenges its students to ask what art is, what it does, who it is for, and why? These are questions that were not previously explicitly considered in most prison art rooms.

The placements happened over a period of five to seven weeks, and fourteen students from GSA took part, two in each of the seven prisons. Prior to the placements commencing, the GSA students visited the prisons and met students and teachers in the learning centres. The visits were intended to explore appropriate topics for realisation.

The resulting ideas were all very different, ranging from the creation of wall panels and children's art workshops for the visitor centre at Shotts, to a 'ladies who lunch' event at the women's prison Cornton Vale, inspired by the American artist Judy Chicago's installation *The Dinner Party* which depicted place settings for 39 mythical and historical famous women. All the students approached the placements with great maturity and devoted much time and effort to preparing for their sessions with the prisoners. Conscious that prisoners may not have been exposed to environmental art before, they were keen to explain their own practice as a starting point for the workshops:

On the first meeting we feel it would be productive to show some artists' work to motivate them (the prisoners). We will pick artists that show a range of media the students might not be used to and that also have interesting developments in their work. (GSA student, project proposal for HMP Barlinnie)

The placements were seen as having benefit for all concerned. For teaching staff they afforded the opportunity to have regular contact with staff and students at one of Scotland's most prestigious art schools, enabling them to keep their own practice fresh. One art teacher who had been teaching for over 14 years in the same prison, who was initially sceptical and had allowed his own practice to lapse, took it up again following the placement. The experience of mentoring the art-school students also heightened teaching staff's awareness of their own skills and experience in managing the classroom and understanding their students' needs:

On the initial visit I saw the potential drawbacks of working with the already established group of prisoners attending art class on Mondays ... two Vietnamese prisoners and one Albanian prisoner who don't speak English, one of the Monday students is unable to concentrate for long periods of time due to his methadone programme and other health issues. Two regular students are particularly unruly and disruptive. Consequently, I have re-arranged the Monday art class register to include prisoners who are able to contribute effectively within the short timeframe we have to work to. (Art teacher, HMP Barlinnie)

Most teachers found the experience of mentoring the students very enjoyable as it reminded them of their younger and more idealistic selves.

The initial pilot placement programme was funded by Artworks,² which aims to develop skills of artists working in participatory settings. For the art-school students the perceived main benefits were increased employability arising from the placements, and learning to communicate and sometimes modify their artistic vision in the context of a real and complex environment. However, although this was an important benefit, this was not the primary motivating factor for the students who participated. Without exception they were motivated by an interest in prisons and prisoners and a desire to share their enthusiasm for art with them:

The students mixed well with the prisoners and the prisoners were receptive to talking to them. At the end of the session the art students were on a high and seemed enthused ... They commented on how much they had enjoyed the visit. (Learning Centre manager, HMP Shotts)

The girls came into Barlinnie in the morning and spent some time with the class. They were both very enthusiastic and friendly and engaged the students immediately. (Art teacher, HMP Barlinnie)

All the GSA students started from a commitment to a co-production model which allowed the prisoners to feel part of the planning process. All were clear that they did not wish to impose their ideas on them:

We would like this to be a collaboration between us, the teachers and the students. Not to be a project dictated to the students by us as we do not feel this would motivate them... (GSA student, project proposal for HMP Greenock)

Most were also very aware of the isolation of prisons and prisoners from the wider community and tried to incorporate some linking of the inside and outside in the work:

The initial stimulus was a set of conversations between ourselves and learners, concerning how they feel that they are perceived by the outside world. Learners reported feeling that they were all 'tarred with the same brush', perceived to be violent/thuggish. To engage with this, we propose a creative exchange between a set of learners in the prison and a set of learners at GSA. (GSA student, project proposal for HMP Glenochil)

An emphasis on links to families was also important to many projects. At Shotts the students worked with the art lecturer to support workshops with prisoners' children during the extended father and child visits. The exhibition of the final work from HMP Barlinnie was held at the Briggait in Glasgow and attended by prisoners' family members.

The prisoners benefited from the opportunity to engage with a different approach to art – understanding the importance of ideas alongside the acquisition of practical skills. The opportunity to mix with 'fellow students', albeit from a very different background, encouraged and reinforced the pro-social identity of *student* rather than *prisoner*.

The success of the placement programme with Glasgow School of Art has led to the development of new placement programmes with Glasgow University in creative writing and to wider discussions about the potential for sustainable links between prisons and universities.

Conclusion

The problems which beset prison education have been rehearsed many times. High turnover in short-term prisons, difficulties of teaching mixed-ability groups, lack of progression opportunities for the more able, limited depth and range of the curriculum, the prevalence of a one-size-fits-all model that ignores the diverse needs of the prison population, the lack of modern technology to support distance and higher level learning, isolation of teaching staff, and lack of opportunities for professional development – all make teaching in prisons challenging. The project-based approach to learning described above can ameliorate some of the methodological difficulties faced by prison teachers when devising teaching and learning strategies for prison classrooms.

There is evidence that the project-based approach encourages collaborative working not only between teachers themselves but also between teaching staff and officers and between the learning centres and the wider community. The approach appears to be successful in engaging prisoners but there remains a deplorable lack of good quality research into prison education. In particular, there are no serious longitudinal studies which would enable us to draw conclusions about whether involvement with education in the prison increases chances of desistance on release.

Anecdotally we know that, for some, the involvement in education initiatives such as *STIR* have proved effective:

STIR is a journey and this can be seen by the evolution of content and in the progress of those involved. At the ceremony for the most recent award, one of the attendees was an ex-prisoner, ex-editorial team member, now at liberty and still involved in the project. Another ex-prisoner, again influenced by *STIR* and the availability of art classes within prison, has gained funding and set up art facilities for ex-offenders (Evolve Art – Glasgow). These are the stories that we would like to see portrayed more often, stories of hope and promise. (*Not Shut Up*, 2013)

The positive outcomes for the two prisoners mentioned were due not solely to involvement in the editorial board during their sentences but also because of relationships built via *STIR* with other organizations and networks, which were able to support the individuals on release.

In essence the approach described here is not new. Project-based learning offers prison teachers a context within which to broaden their students' horizons, challenge existing beliefs, and raise aspirations. Duguid (1987) argued in the 1980s for a liberal arts approach for prison education, arguing that education must be a civilizing experience, one which stretches existing thinking and encourages a re-evaluation of values. He argues that a liberal education focused on the humanities frees the individual from the limitations of outlook brought on by social class, labelling and the prison. Liberal arts students are more inclined to think of the world in terms of cause and effect, have the ability to be committed to one position while understanding diverse views, and have more sophisticated understanding of power and authority. They may also have increased empathy and intellectual flexibility. As Duguid points out, without these attributes increased literacy and vocational qualifications will have little impact on the lives of released prisoners.

This truth has been recognized more recently by the Prisoner Learning Alliance which advocates in its recent report for a 'whole-person' approach to learning. 'True employability skills sought by employers encompass much wider capability in self-belief, resilience and ability to work with others that are best promoted by a wider vision of learning (Prisoner Learning Alliance, 2013: 6). Similarly, a recent report by the European Commission notes:

There are a number of ways in which the attractiveness, quality and efficiency of prison education and training can be improved ... Innovative learning methods, which put the emphasis on the

learner and build on their knowledge and experience, are needed to attract prisoners into learning. (Hawley *et al.*, 2013: 5)

There remain many challenges to the development of an education policy and practice which will meet the needs of all prisoners. However, the prospects for a fundamental reshaping and refocusing of prison education, in Scotland at least, look promising.

Notes

1. Inspiring Change was an ambitious programme of arts activities in five Scottish prisons led by Motherwell College and involving a range of national arts organizations, including the Citizens Theatre and Traverse Theatre, the Scottish Chamber Orchestra, the Scottish Ensemble, the National Youth Choir of Scotland, Scottish Opera, and the National Galleries of Scotland. The National Galleries element of the project resulted in an exhibition of prisoners' work entitled *Mirrors: Prison portraits*; see: www.nationalgalleries.org/education/projects/mirrors-prison-portraits (accessed 21 May 2014)
2. ArtWorks Scotland is a national professional development initiative for artists working in participatory settings. It is one of five projects across the UK that are part of ArtWorks: Developing Practice in Participatory Settings – a special initiative from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation – and is partnership funded by Creative Scotland. Online. www.creativescotland.com/what-we-do/major-projects/creative-learning-and-young-people/artworks-scotland (accessed 8 May 2014).

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