

LEARNING CRIMINOLOGY INSIDE: PRISON-BASED CRIMINOLOGY INSTRUCTION AT MANCHESTER

SHADD MARUNA, ROSE BROAD, CAROLINE MILES AND EMILY TURNER: SCHOOL OF LAW

ABSTRACT

The Learning Criminology Inside project started in September 2017 at HM Risley Prison. Drawing on the model of other prison-university partnerships (e.g. “Inside Out” at Durham and “Learning Together” at Cambridge), this pilot project involved 3rd year BA Criminology students studying weekly with prison-based students. Together, in the prison, they had seminars, discussing the course content for ‘From Imprisonment to Rehabilitation’, facilitated by University staff and invited experts. This project aimed to provide higher educational opportunities to those who do not usually have easy access to it, to give University of Manchester students an enriched learning experience and to strengthen links between the University of Manchester and the criminal justice system.

Funding by CHERIL provided the opportunity to research the outcomes and impacts participating in the course had on all students and staff who took part in the course. The main findings were that taking part in the course enhanced learning for both sets of students. Both prison-based students as well as university-based students reported experiencing transformational personal benefits as a result of the project.

THE PROJECT AND IT'S AIMS

The project aimed to develop, plan and pilot a prison-based criminology unit between the University of Manchester and HMP Risley, in which BA criminology students take their seminars for ‘From Imprisonment to Rehabilitation’ inside the prison alongside prison-based students working on the same material. HMP Risley is a category C resettlement prison in Warrington. It is a male prison and the men in here have all reduced their risk or committed lower risk crimes. HMP Risley houses men who have committed all types of crime but vulnerable prisoners (including those convicted of sexual offences) were not included on the course due to logistical reasons for the prison. A risk assessment was carried out and approved by both the Prison and University, and University ethical approval was sought and granted for both the teaching and research aspects of the project.

There have been a growing number of courses across the UK since 2014 offering students from inside prison and from universities to learn together in prison. The first such course was the Inside-Out programme run by the University of Durham, which uses a model from America that has been running since 1997. The University of Cambridge started Learning Together in 2015 with HMP Grendon. Both the Inside-Out and Learning Together models of prison-based learning see university and prisoner students as equals (Pompa, 2013; Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016; Darke and Aresti, 2016) where “everyone involved is seen as having something vital to offer in the learning process” (Pompa, 2013: 129). There are now over 30 prison-university partnerships in the UK (PET, 2018), although this is the first such project at the University of Manchester.

The Learning Criminology Inside project aimed to:

- Offer prisoners the opportunity to access university-level education in a seminar style environment where they can interact with university students and academic staff. Higher education currently available in prisons tends to be self-funded through an Advanced Learner Loan and typically involves

independent study (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016). This project aimed to provide more structured higher educational opportunities to those who do not usually have easy access to it.

- Offer University of Manchester students an enriched learning experience with the opportunity to experience a prison environment and interact with prison staff and prisoners.
- Establish a stronger relationship between the University of Manchester and local prisons in furtherance of the University's commitment to the public good, social responsibility and transformational scholarship.

This research project aimed to explore what the outcomes and impacts of taking part in the course were for prison-based students, university students, university staff and prison environments.

Learning Criminology Inside involved 22 students (10 from University of Manchester) and 12 from the prison studying the course unit 'From Imprisonment to Rehabilitation' together over 12 weeks, beginning in September 2017. The pilot began with an introductory session where students got to know each other and ground rules were set. For the next 10 weeks, university-students attended lectures and prison-based students listened to a podcast of that lecture and once a week the two sets of students had a seminar together in the prison for approximately 90 minutes. Here they debated and discussed the topic led by different university staff and guest speakers from a range of organisations, including criminal justice, NGOs and academics from other institutions. University-students and staff travelled to the prison together every week in a mini-bus which provided opportunities for debrief. In the twelfth week, there was an end-of-course celebration where all students received a certificate for taking part in, and contributing to, the course. This celebration event also featured a guest speaker from an organisation specialising in peer mentoring from people exiting the criminal justice system and music from one of the prison-based students. Student learning was assessed with an examination in January 2018 and a required coursework assignment. Those who passed the course received a further certificate for successful completion of the module.

Evaluation approach

To date, there has been remarkably little systematic research on the outcomes of university-prison partnerships. CHERIL funding provided a rare opportunity to explore the change mechanisms and impacts associated with the Manchester-Risley project. Although only a small scale pilot evaluation, it is hoped that this work can be used to improve future partnerships. The research design was mixed-methods and participant-orientated, aimed at understanding the perspectives and reactions of student and staff participants as the project progressed. Data collection strategies included each of the following:

UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND PRISONER STUDENTS TAKING PART IN THE PRISON-BASED LEARNING

Pre and post surveys of UoM and Risley students. All students taking part in the prison-based learning were asked to complete a survey before, and on completion of the course. The survey has been designed by staff at the University of Cambridge and has been adapted from scales measuring characteristics associated with good learning outcomes and reflective of aspects that research suggests are important to desistance from crime. These surveys also gauge general satisfaction levels with the course and measure the short-term impact of the pilot, and whether the expected outcomes of the project have been met.

Pre and post focus groups. There were 4 focus groups, with University and Prisoner students taking part in groups separately (one before the course started and one at the end of the course). The University students and Prisoner students were in separate groups to allow frank conversations about any fears they might have of learning with the other set of students. These enabled evaluation of the whole course.

Reflective diaries. These were completed by University and Prison-based students each week. These diaries helped to determine what the impacts of taking part in the course were on the students and ensured an evaluation of the course at the micro week by week level.

Participant Observation. The Research Associate on the project attended every session as a 'Participant as Observer' (Fetterman, 1998). Notes were taken during the sessions and typed up as ethnographic notes. The observations helped understand the process in the prison-based learning sessions that allow for the impacts on University and Prisoner students to occur.

UNIVERSITY STAFF

University staff also completes a *reflective diary* on the weeks that they taught on the course in the prison. These captured the impacts on UoM and Risley students but also on themselves as representatives of the University.

PRISON STAFF

Short semi-structured interviews with 5 members of prison staff, with a range of grades and responsibilities, were conducted at the end of the course. The aim of these was to see how the course benefitted the prison and how it could have been improved from the point of view of the prison.

All qualitative data was analysed thematically using computer-aided software NVIVO. The quantitative data from the pre and post surveys was analysed using SPSS.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE STRATEGIC GOALS OF THE UNIVERSITY AND CHERIL

This project engages with the University's commitment to the public good and transformational scholarship. It provides educational access for individuals in prison with severely limited access to such opportunities. At the same time providing higher education in prisons can (as is shown below) have transformational benefits and help with the rehabilitation of prisoners.

The project also meets the University's goal of Social Responsibility by contributing to a stronger relationship between the University of Manchester and the local criminal justice system. A Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the University of Manchester and the Governor of HMP Risley. By engaging with prisons in the local area the University is giving something back to the local communities.

One of CHERIL's activities is to develop master classes and as part of the project we have developed guidance on setting up partnerships and in a seminar to be held in June we will be delivering this guidance to other departments in order to support other departments in running their own programmes. The research elements help meet CHERIL's aim of original rigorous education research. As similar courses are offered in other institutions this can be considered a development in teaching and learning and in developing a similar course it ensures the University is keeping up with other universities.

INNOVATIVE ASPECTS

While the concept of university and prison-based students learning alongside each other is not entirely new (although such projects have only emerged in the UK in the past few years), this is the first such opportunity at the University of Manchester and required considerable effort to overcome the risk concerns of both the University and the Prison. Now that this pioneering effort has been established, hopefully other schools in the University (and other universities) can learn from these experiences and develop similar work. Moreover, the UoM project includes unique features; most importantly, the CHERIL-funded research will be among the first published evaluations of this teaching.

INITIAL FINDINGS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS

Taking part in Learning Criminology Inside led to positive impacts for both sets of students and for staff.

Impacts on both sets of students

- **Enhanced Learning.**

The theories and models in criminology were put in the context of real life examples with the students learning from each other. It helped the University students to gain a fuller appreciation of the complex lives that make up the 'data' of criminological research. The course brought key criminological ideas alive with stories from Prison-based students. The University-based students were meeting people who had experienced precisely the issues that they were learning about. At the same time, the Prison-based students were offered the opportunity to situate their own experiences in a wider, theoretical literature and see how their experiences were either shared or not shared by others in empirical research. An important finding was that the other group of students often made students think differently about a topic as they often had very different opinions:

"Due to the fact that probation will be a large part of their life, I feel like they were engaged in the topic and had some very interesting thoughts on it. I found this extremely interesting and expanded my opinions of the privatisation on the prisons and allowed me to look at it in a way I would never have thought of without hearing their views." (University-based student – Blair¹)

University-students said that the prison-based seminar included all of the aspects of a "normal seminar" yet they felt it was more energetic, with more people contributing than seminars at the university:

"I've just come from a university seminar now and they are all hiding behind their laptops, the teacher would have to stare you down to get you to say something whereas this everyone was jumping all over each other, it was so energetic, and everyone was just so passionate about it and it helped you form opinions" (university-based student - Meg)

- **Increased engagement**

Some University-based students reported feeling more dedicated to the course unit because of Learning Criminology Inside, wanting to do well for the Prison-based students and choosing topics that mattered to them rather than ones they knew they would do well at:

"It helps you be more critical and I felt like I owed it something, after going through this course and speaking to all of the people and hearing what they had to say on the ground level and backing it up with academic theories, I think all the layers came together and made my essay so personal to me" (University-based student - Mary)

Prison-based students, in particular, engaged deeply with the module, often breaking out in discussions during the formal podcast out of excitement about the issues, requesting additional readings (in addition to their very sizable course reading packs), and consistently contributing to seminar discussions.

¹ All names of students are pseudonyms – chosen by themselves in the initial session as an ice-breaker.

- **Breaking down barriers and stereotypes**

Participants routinely said that the course helped breakdown stereotypes of who is an “offender” and who is a “university student”:

“As we walked out of the prison, for the first time since the project started, I did not notice the prison walls. They shattered. We had done that. By coming in week after week and taking part in this project and with the guys taking part, we broke the wall down and connected. And I think that’s what it’s all about. Reaching out, connecting and staying connected. Foucault said that modern punishment is hidden and I do agree that it is particularly through the architecture (high walls, obscure locations). But through operations like this project, we make punishment visible. We push it to the surface and make punishment the community’s problem, our problem, everyone’s problem. We all need to deal with it as that is the only true way we can help people” (University-based student – Bonnie)

Impacts specifically for UoM students

- **Career decisions.**

Taking part in the course impacted on the University student’s career choices with many saying that they now want to work directly with prisoner issues. Importantly, one student has now enrolled on the Unlocked Graduates scheme, a fast-track for university graduates interested in working in the prison service. Two of the other students are now volunteering at an ex-prisoner resettlement service in Manchester (Additionally, it is no coincidence that that service is run by the keynote speaker at the end-of-course celebration for the Learning Prison Inside project).

- **Enhanced employability**

For some taking part in the course led to enhanced employability mainly because they now had examples to write on their CVs that are based on interactions with offenders:

“It confirmed that I want to work with offenders [...] when I was answering to apply for National Probation, (even though I have to wait) it said if you can put examples in terms of when you have dealt with offenders you can do” (University-based student - Blair)

- **More realistic view of working with offenders**

A further outcome for university-based students was that they were given a realistic view of what working with offenders can be like and that like the people going through the desistance process the person working with them will have ups and downs. The UoM students felt that this was good preparation for their future careers.

“I also think this gives us a good perspective of what it would be like to work in the criminal justice area – you might get along with someone really well on a personal level and have high hopes for them to change and to rehabilitate but ultimately their lives are complex and the odds are maybe stacked up against them. I think this also taught me that working in this area could bring a lot of disappointment” (Holly-University-based student)

Impacts specifically for Risley students

- **Desistance based support.**

For Prison-based students learning about the processes they would be embarking upon on release helped prepare them for what is to come. One said:

“It is not going to just be a straight path to desistance but I think because I have a good understanding of that ... I will be more prepared for the journey ahead” (Prison-based student Joe)

- **Transformational benefits**

There is evidence that Prison-based students had transformational benefits such as beginning to think seriously about pursuing higher education and seeing themselves as more capable of achieving something outside of crime.

“He told me that he is really interested in studying for a music degree when he leaves prison. He said that this has been driven by taking part in our course. When he started Learning Criminology Inside he enjoyed it and decided he wanted to do a degree and decided that if he could cope with our course he would study music on release.” (Prison-based student – Shadow)

For others they discovered abilities they did not know they had, such as being able to write an essay or contribute to discussions. These subjective changes have been shown to be important for desistance (see e.g., Maruna, 2001). This type of outcome benefits the whole of society. There was also evidence that during the course, especially in order to make it to classes, the Prison-based students were practising some of the internal skills that have been shown to aid desistance such as persistence and assertiveness.

- **Normality and humanity.**

A further important impact for the Risley students was experiencing normality and “being treated like a human being”. As the course took place in a resettlement prison this is relevant timing for reintegration.

“It takes the prisoners away from prison life which is regimented with a regime they have to follow and anything that takes away from that is a positive - it is about normality. No matter how long people are in prison it is a culture shock when they are released so the more normal they can get while in prison the better. They can practice conversations with people outside.” (Prison Staff 1)

“I was surprised at how calm and relaxed the students were around us and the fact that they were not judgemental and that they were understanding that we are still human beings and that we all make mistakes” (Prison-based student – Shadow)

“Interacting with normal people and not a load of criminals, seeing everyone else from outside rather than looking at people from the inside” (Prison-based student – Geoff)

“In week one I was considering removing myself from the course before I had even started it, but after just 10 minutes in the class with everybody else I was glad that I attended. I was made to feel welcome and as if my opinions mattered by the other students” (Prison-based student – Joe)

Linked to this idea is that for some the course was beneficial as it meant that they had time out of their cell, this was especially true for those who had no other meaningful activities in prison.

Impacts on university staff

- **Personal Development**

Regular observations of other's teaching styles, rather than once a semester peer review had an impact on university staff.

"It was really good for me to observe [guest lecturers] teach and I feel I learned a lot from their techniques of running seminars and controlling the group. It is interesting that I teach the same seminar the day earlier than the prison session so was useful for me to reflect on how I explain things and how [guest lecturer] does and learn from her" (Ethnographic reflections)

Impact on prisons

- **Provision of higher level education**

"There is wider interest from the governor and from learners to do more bespoke, different, relevant and engaging education. [We] need to form new partnerships and relationships and find that something extra and valuable like this as HE hard to deliver on current contract [...] It is something different and learners will benefit [...] Higher level learning is not offered on day to day basis and so this is great for learners who want academic challenge." (Prison staff 2)

The implications of these findings are that the seminar style of learning in the prison with the two sets of students was successful with all people benefiting from this in some way.

- **Broader impact on rehabilitative culture**

In addition to this, there were indications of a wider impact of the project across the prison in terms of improving the 'rehabilitative ethos' of the environment. One senior prison officer, assigned to supervise the end-of-course celebration for instance was so moved by what he heard from the speeches that he approached the course leaders and said "That was the smartest thing I think I have ever heard in this prison in 30 years of being a prison officer."

PROJECT DISSEMINATION PLAN

The extensive data is currently being analysed further with the aim of writing several journal articles and book chapters about the research. An abstract has already been accepted for a special issue of the Journal of Prison Education and Reentry about the project and research findings. The final article is due in June 2018.

In addition, the Manchester-Risley project pilot has already received national attention from *Times Higher Education*, *The Guardian* and Prisoner Education Trust in the following articles and blogs:

<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/transformative-effect-university-level-learning-inside-prisons>

<http://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/case-studies/pupil-blog-learning-criminology-inside-hmp-risley-and-the-university-of-manchester>

<http://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/case-studies/pupil-blog-inside-learning-criminology-inside-a-second-perspective>

<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/nov/09/the-criminology-course-opening-the-door-to-education-for-prisoners>

Finally, the project team have secured funding from the University's Social Responsibility fund for a seminar to disseminate the findings from this project, to engage with other schools and faculties across the University of Manchester to support them in setting up further prison-university partnerships, and to engage with prison staff. This will take place in June 2018 in HMP Risley.

KEEPING TO BUDGET AND SUSTAINABILITY PLAN

The project went just over budget (by approximately £200). The School of Law has kept the RA who was employed using CHERIL money on until July 2018 to set up more Learning Criminology Inside courses. Internal negotiations and external bids are being considered for funding for the courses for 2018/19 and beyond.

REFLECTING BACK: WHAT WOULD BE DONE DIFFERENTLY

Working in prisons always has its challenges, but the last few years have been particularly trying in British prisons. This project started in HMP Risley at a time of critical staff shortages which led to a curtailed regime at the prison where only certain wings were unlocked at any one time. This project included prison-based students from a variety of wings and those who were not on wings being unlocked at the times of the two weekly sessions struggled to make it to sessions, particularly in the first few weeks. These men reported that the prison staff were not aware of the project and so unwilling to unlock them. There was also an issue with Prison Officer Association guidance on the new regime. To alleviate some of these issues and to ensure all students were able to get to all sessions, better engagement with prison staff, and promotion of the course within the prison is necessary. As a member of prison staff said:

"It was successful but to build on it you need more buy in from the rest of the prison. We should have advertised it more." (Prison staff 1)

While the ethos behind Learning Together initiatives is equity across the treatment of all student groups, there were some instances where this was not always achieved in the current project due to the circumstances. Again due to staff shortages there were three lock downs on the day the podcast was to be shown in the prison. There was also a lack of equity in the amount of support the two sets of students had access to during the writing of their essays with University-based students being able to contact the tutors at any time and having greater access to IT and other resources. A new proposed format for Learning Criminology Inside would be to have one, longer, session per week which involved a 30 minute formal input followed by a 90 minute seminar. This session would also involve Teaching Assistant support so there are more staff to facilitate small group work within the seminar, as this is where the majority of students reported feeling most comfortable and able to make contributions. There would be mentors in the prison (previous students) who could help support the Prison-based students. There would also be support sessions involving the University students in the lead up to essay submission. The prison would help facilitate more IT support including Virtual Campus where the Prison-based students can email the University tutors.

The attrition rate for Prison-based students was high. The course started with 12 and ended with 6 prison-based students. During recruitment, release dates were taken into account but because HMP Risley is a category C prison men are constantly trying to progress through the prison estate and some left to go to a category D prison while others were released early on electronic tag. In future years, recruitment and selection within the prison would take into account Category D and Home Detention Curfew eligibility dates. However, eligibility does not necessarily mean these are granted.

There were some issues with a lack of engagement among Prison-based students e.g. not coming to sessions prepared, not doing all the reading. To address this next time the course will be advertised more widely in the prison so we have more applicants and the selection process will be more rigorous to ensure we get the most dedicated students. The room in the prison was not acoustically conducive to teaching and the conditions that

the Prison-based students had to study in were not ideal – many said they found it hard to motivate themselves when they were alone in their cells. However these prison-based issues are harder to overcome.

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