

Creative Writing in Prison

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'Lock 'em up and throw away the key.' How many times do we hear this phrase used in the context of prisoners? If we mechanically process everyone together then we don't have to see the individual, we don't have to look at someone's life experiences, addictions, mental health issues, and we certainly don't have to think about that person returning to our communities.

From my teaching experience, I constantly realise that creative writing provides a key to unlocking ideas, unlocking insular thinking and unlocking potential. So with creativity you always begin with the potential aspect. One word, one line can be the building blocks towards a poem or a story. Individual achievement is often where there are low literacy levels but results in something to share with family members, a new way to communicate. Self-reflection is gained and the potential of more imaginative writing.

Creative writing changes our mindset, teaches us to think about others, to explore other lives and experiences, whether as fictional characters or as a self-analysis in our own life. We feel compassion and empathy, we connect to philosophies and encounter characters' traits. We nurture and grow; we edit and revise. And what is rehabilitation, if not the ability to recognise patterns of behaviour, to understand the need for change, and importantly to have the tools to input that change.

I've never believed that writing should be locked away in a drawer or a file. We shouldn't be afraid or embarrassed by our personal explorations. Writing skills have many platforms, from teaching research skills, styles of journalism, computer know-how as well as IT knowledge while providing the opportunity to consider what makes an interesting article, engaging and compelling. You learn to make decisions about content and form, as well as the many techniques for creating the piece of writing. Working in a creative writing group gives a sense of the work belonging together. We share our experiences through the content, and this in turn teaches us how to critique and understand someone else's work.

How many of us have said, 'I could write a book?' But writing takes more than time; it takes focus and arduous discipline. The discipline and skills of any craft require practice, except that in writing you are within an interior world. You need at least 75,000 words for a novel and that certainly takes focus, discipline, tenacity, and staying power. Works of quality are even harder to achieve. Prison writing is a unique genre that communicates ideas, conveys thoughts, prejudices, love and hope and regrets. Writing creates a safe space to step back and reflect upon ourselves, see our thoughts and those of others. It is not just a mirror of the self, it is a larger mirror to see others in all aspects of shared common humanity, giving a voice to the invisible.

So who wants to listen to prisoners? Who wants to hear what they have to say? Supporting arts in prison provides a vitally important role in the lives of prisoners, in how they reevaluate themselves, and how they stay connected with their families, their wives, their mothers, their children, and with the survival of these relationships under duress.

I won't pretend that creative writing is the great cure all. It can be an immense challenge to make a beginning and see it through to completion. What works for one person may not work for another...but without a doubt the arts have a place in prison because there are possibilities of expression for the prisoner, for their version of literature, and definitely for rehabilitation since art creates a parallel world in which to view the actual world. Rather than the reductive concept of locking someone up and throwing away the key, creativity can unlock interior aspects of personality.

What have Christopher Marlowe, Daniel Defoe, Oscar Wilde, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, O. Henry, Paul Verlaine, William S. Burroughs, Dashiell Hammett, Ken Kesey, Jack London all got in common? These writers served time in prison. All these writers are among those who have given us some of the most eloquent, true, insightful, and beautiful literature. Their struggle, pain and sufferings transformed into art that is definitional. Good writing doesn't come from an easy place, good literature has never been main-stream...that's a historical fact, if we look at the cannon of great writers through time.

However, overcoming extreme personal situations, resolving inner conflicts, and bringing the self to inner harmony are among the mysteries of creativity, writing, literature, music and art.

I would like to finish by including a poem that one of my students wrote. Without support for the arts in prison, this poem would never have been written. I see this every day in my work as Creative Writing Teacher in prison, that writing doesn't have to be about something earth shattering, it doesn't have to be about an over towering outcome, but it is a way of getting though hour by hour, day by day. And it is often a simple act of creative writing, a few lines which as if by magic connect one human being to another.

'Poem' by GS

Behind the walls and wire fences,
the locks and razor wire
a young man walks to writing class
and his youthful heart on fire

He's learned to write good poetry
and he has a girl at home
and his love flows through the keyboard
as he writes his girl a poem.

He wrote it in his cell last night
while listening to their song
true love is in the words he writes
he says it won't be long

until the gates are opened wide
and he wants her to be there
a smile upon her loving lips
and sunlight in her hair.

In all the grey and loneliness
where every man's alone
the young man walks to writing class
and writes his love a poem.

Prisoners help families in need, [December 19, 2019](#), Mary Dennehy

CLOVERHILL Prison inmates made a significant contribution to families in need this Christmas after organising a food drive for Crosscare – which, due to demand, is opening a second food bank in Tallaght in the new year. Now an annual tradition, the inmates at the Clondalkin-based remand prison have for the past six years held a Christmas food drive in aid of the Jobstown Crosscare team.

The Crosscare food bank in Jobstown provides a weekly food shop and vouchers to around 50 families every Wednesday, with an increase in demand at Christmas seeing 150 families being supported in the coming days.

Due to a demand over the past year, Crosscare this week told The Echo that it is hoping to open a second food bank in the Tallaght area in the new year.

Liam Byrne, of Crosscare in Jobstown, said: “We have seen an increase in demand unfortunately, and are looking at opening a second food bank in Tallaght in the coming year. “We are just so busy . . and are looking at locations in Tallaght, which will be easily accessible for families.”

Crosscare Jobstown works closely with St Vincent De Paul (SVP), which identifies families in need and refers them to the food bank. Due to demand and a lack of food banks in neighbouring communities, Crosscare Jobstown regularly supports families from across South Dublin County.

However, Liam stressed how food collections like the one in Cloverhill Prison will help support the challenging work of Crosscare this Christmas.

“The annual food drive in Cloverhill makes a huge difference to families who are struggling”, Liam said. “Everything the lads have donated will go into the Christmas hampers, and they have become an important

part of the hampers we give out every year. “There are people who will now wake up on Christmas Day a lot happier, thanks to the lads.”

A number of prisoners in Cloverhill are part of a volunteers group, which looks at ways to help both the outside community and the community within the prison.

One of the initiatives organised by the volunteer group is the annual food drive for Crosscare in Jobstown.

Inmates are encouraged to buy items in the tuck shop, like teabags, biscuits, chocolate, package soups and porridge, to donate to the food drive – with the bumper bin of donated items collected by Crosscare this week.

Caitriona McGrath, PE teacher in Cloverhill, told The Echo how despite your situation, people can always do something good – and be kind. According to Caitriona, the volunteer group takes charge of the whole project – which alongside helping struggling families on the outside, is a boost for those within the prison too.

“A lot of the prisoners know about Crosscare from their own lives on the outside, so it’s important to them,” Caitriona said. “The food drive also helps the community within the prison, it’s a feel-good project and gives prisoners a boost of moral. “This can be a very negative environment so it’s good to do something positive for the whole place.”

Any other groups or businesses which would like to support Crosscare and the families it helps, are encouraged to get in touch. Local businesses are also invited to do food drives throughout the year.

To learn more about Crosscare in Jobstown call Crosscare head office on 8360011 or for help contact SVP on 8848200.

We're Here To Help: Peer to Peer Literacy in Portlaoise Prison Education Unit

Ann Hegarty (NALA), David Higgins, Shauna Gilligan and Jane Meally (Portlaoise Prison) with input from the students of Peer to Peer Tutors Programme

Background to the Peer to Peer Literacy Ambassadors and Tutors Programme Portlaoise

Prompted by both students and Education Unit teachers an innovative adult literacy education intervention has resulted in a group of learners participating in a National Adult Literacy Agency (NALA) / Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) Level 6 accredited training programme. In February 2019 discussions between Laois Offaly Education Training Board, NALA and Portlaoise Prison Education Unit teachers considered the request of students attending the Education Unit to provide support to their peers.

Following the initial meeting and approval from IPS it was agreed that NALA would provide two training sessions to support the development of the project. Initially participants envisaged a Peer to Peer Literacy

Ambassador role for themselves, one which built on successful peer led models such as the Listeners Programme and the Alternatives to Violence Programme. The sessions in April and May 2019 included eleven learners, two education officers, eight teachers, staff from probation and the prison chaplain. The focus of these workshops was on raising awareness of literacy and its central role in human interactions, building relationships, accessing rights and the contribution of literacy confidence to health and wellbeing. Furthermore literacy and its unequal distribution across Irish society was identified in the initial training while the common experiences of education and wider inequalities were identified by the group.

"Others are coming to us now. Peers are encouraging others and looking after them."

"If they drop off then the ambassadors will do more work to encourage them to try again"
Prison Education Unit Staff

Peer to Peer Literacy Ambassadors

Following these workshops and supported by teachers from the Prison Education Unit the Peer to Peer Literacy Ambassadors planned a programme to promote the Education Unit over the Summer months. The students designed posters and flyers using plain English; posters were displayed on prison landings and promotional flyers were distributed in prison laundry bags. One of the slogans used was "We are here to help". Some Peer to Peer Literacy Ambassadors provided informal support such as letter writing on the landings, while others encouraged their peers to engage with the Education Unit.

In September, participants reflected on their tentative experiences of encouraging learners back to education. These descriptions were very positive. One Peer to Peer Literacy Ambassador spoke of having 'good feelings' about the work, another spoke of 'self-fulfilment', and of getting something back from being involved. Some reflected on the importance of building trust with others about the service through maintaining confidentiality in terms of related conversations. These positive experiences prompted the students to think more ambitiously. With the encouragement of the Education Unit they began to consider the possibilities of training as Peer Literacy Tutors.

Becoming Peer Literacy Tutors and more

The NALA/ WIT Developing Literacies 1 module is a core module of the Higher Certificate in Arts in Literacy Development and provides a solid foundation in adult education theory and the practical tools needed to support a literacy learner. In this particular context, the course has three phases, the first consists of 30 hours of training while the second is the apprenticeship phase wherein tutors begin to work with learners in a supported context. The final phase includes a further ten hours of in-service training. For those who wish to gain accreditation, the portfolio of assessment includes an assignment and three comprehensive lesson plans.

The mid-way evaluation and feedback has been overwhelmingly positive. Many participants believe they have had a positive impact on the prison already. This has been confirmed by teachers who have stated that

the numbers of people turning up for support has increased. Furthermore the Peers, a name which the group now call themselves and which is gaining recognition in the wider prison community, believe that they are helping to break down the stigma which is so often associated with literacy.

Personal learning identified by the Peers included a growth in compassion for other prisoners and a newly articulated understanding about the masks people wear to protect themselves and their identities whilst incarcerated. Many saw their involvement in the programme as a means of being good role models to their children. They believed they were showing that they valued education through their commitment and engagement in the programme. They spoke of learning new and useful skills which could also be used to support their children's literacy

"I think we are changing minds about the value of education" Peer to Peer Literacy Ambassador

Apprenticeship, February 2020

Eleven students began training in April 2019, five of whom have either transferred or been released. The remaining six intend to complete the programme and submit portfolios for accreditation.

The group meet fortnightly for participatory, creative and reflective workshops which aim to develop their skills as Literacy Tutors. They are

currently coming towards the end of their first phase of training and are about to embark on the 'getting real' stage of the programme. Literacy Tutors will be matched with learners and begin their practice with the support of a sound mentoring structure which has been developed by teachers in the Education Unit in conjunction with education officers and in collaboration with the group

Impact of this unique intervention: the pilot programme

This unique intervention has developed as the thinking and requirements of participants evolved through their engagement. Progress has been supported by the students' willingness to reflect on and share their early experiences of learning and to analyse the impact of unhelpful aspects of early learning structures. Through their reflections the participants have envisaged a different type of education, one which is underpinned by adult education principles of inclusivity, empowerment, ownership, and transformation.

Reflecting on this article and the impact of the programme on the wider prison community the six students embarking on their apprenticeship reminded us that by encouraging others to engage with education their own morale and confidence has grown. They believe their involvement is also having a positive influence on mental health by enabling interaction and support. The group

also highlighted the unique position they have as peers in reducing perceived barriers to participation. They believed that the Education Unit Staff were sometimes viewed as 'at a different level and more qualified and educated' than the general prison population and that this in itself was a barrier for some prisoners. However this barrier was not there when it came to approaching peers to look for support and to begin to speak about learning needs.

On the landings, the group observed that the programme seems to be removing stigma about learning; it is now a good thing to be seen with books under your arm. Their involvement in the programme is also helping people not only become more informed about what courses are available through the Education Unit but also allowing them to envision the long term differences education can make, in other words, creating pathways for life beyond prison.

"The programme has reduced the stigma, mystique and other worldliness attached to literacy education because it is being delivered and promoted by Peers who live together"
Prison Education Unit Staff

Hydebank Wood College: “If your main focus in prison isn’t education and learning, you’ve got it wrong.” Jayne Finlay

Hydebank Wood College is a Secure College on the outskirts of Belfast, which is home both to young men between the ages of 18-21 and to Northern Ireland’s female prison population. It has a strong educational ethos, having transitioned from a Young Offenders Centre to a Secure College in 2015. In September 2019, a newly renovated Learning and Skills Centre opened at Hydebank which included redesigned classrooms and a modern library built around a large communal space with comfortable seating and a coffee area. After carrying out a research project on the previous library space, I recently visited this new library and learning space at Hydebank to speak to staff and students about the changes.

I learnt that one of the main reasons for this renovation was to create a space which would motivate students and encourage them to participate in education. Recognising that many have had negative experiences of formal education before being incarcerated, they hoped to create a space that did not resemble a traditional school setting. *“If it looked like a school, they wouldn’t want to come.”* They aimed to create an environment more akin to modern college settings, which would then make it easier and less daunting for students who decided to continue their studies when they left Hydebank. The architects focused on space, lighting and furniture in trying to create this environment. When I first entered the space, I was struck most by how light and spacious this area was in comparison to the previous learning and skills department. Staff commented that there was a higher level of respect for this new area and that both staff and students felt more at ease here.

Central to this new learning space is the library, which had been transformed from a small, windowless room to a large, bright space with colourful seating and shelving. Large windows meant that the library is now visible from almost anywhere in Hydebank, making it more enticing to visit. Walking into the library felt like walking into a vibrant community library. Twenty young men were in the space when I visited. Some were chatting in a group, others were reading or chatting to staff members and one student was concentrating on a book folding activity.

I later stayed for a “Reading Aloud” session with female prisoners in the evening, where a volunteer read a short story and poems and we discussed them as a group. Enthusiastic and committed library staff meant that the library had always been an engaging space at Hydebank, but this new space made the library even more welcoming. Governors were clear that the library is “vital” within this learning space and is “the heart of the community” at Hydebank, and teaching staff described it as “the hub of the learning area.” This centrality of the library and the importance of its space was a main finding from my own research. It was clearly a safe space for the students at Hydebank, especially those who were experiencing incarceration for the first time. The social learning environment here and the range of informal learning activities also served as a hook for participation in other educational and vocational programmes in this college. I was told that the college had agreed to significantly invest in this new library as they recognised the importance of the library space and its services.

One of the mantras of the Northern Ireland Prison Service is that their prisons are “part of the community and not apart from it.” There is a strong focus on community engagement at Hydebank, and this new learning space has facilitated opportunities for people from the local community and further afield to come in through the college doors. It served as the location for the launch of a local cross-community festival (4 Corners Festival Belfast). The wellbeing classroom plays host to a Learning Together initiative run alongside Queens University Belfast, the first university-prison partnership of this kind in Northern Ireland. This not only gives students at Hydebank a taste of university life, but

also offers students from QUB a more realistic view of prison life. Opening up doors which have long been cut off to the public can help to counter the misconceptions which exist about prisons and prisoners and hopefully help to change mindsets about incarceration.

The learning centre and its library provides opportunities for both formal and informal learning to take place at Hydebank. One Governor commented “if your main focus in prison isn’t education and learning, you’ve got it wrong.” It was refreshing to see the concept of space being taken so seriously in creating an effective learning environment and to hear positive feedback from both staff and students about these changes. As someone whose research focuses on prison library services, it was also encouraging to hear staff describe the library space as being paramount to a prisoner’s journey of learning. Having visited numerous libraries across the UK and Ireland, this space stands out as a positive example of supporting and empowering its students in a relaxed and informal environment. The following video offers a glimpse of this new learning space at Hydebank

: <https://offchan.com/learning-skills-at-hydebank-wood-college>.

Cloverhill Services Christmas Lunch

With many services all working under the same roof, we often walk by people smile and not know anything about them or their role in this unique environment. The school teachers in Cloverhill decided to change this by inviting all the services to gather for some lunch and networking in early December. The kitchen in the prison provided delicious sandwiches and wraps with the school providing the desserts to sweeten up our guests. The event was held in the school over lunch time. All services including psychology, psychiatric, nurses,

librarians, counsellors, chaplains, governors etc were all invited to meet each other, introduce themselves and their roles within this prison. It was a chance to get to know people in an informal environment and has led to some opportunities of services working together. The staffing often changes in Cloverhill prison and it is important not to feel isolated. This now annual event has been a great success and we are already looking forward to next year.

Cloverhill School and Library Services

The school in Cloverhill joined forces with the Prison Library Services to host two events in the first semester of school in 2019-2020.

A talk about the famous Mohammed Ali proved popular with the students of Cloverhill. This icon is well admired by all, including our students. The library offered an opportunity to learn more about this man and his incredible life. The event was quite interactive with videos and radio clips. Some footage was quite rare. The library service focused on the link between Mohammed Ali and his connection

with Ireland, sharing stories that are often unknown.

In December the library service and school organised a card making workshop for students, the theme being Christmas. The students were guided in how to make cards and how to get them looking at the more expensive range. This event was well attended, and many lads walked away with two or three cards to share with their families and friends over the Christmas period.