

Evaluating the Story Exchange Project

A participatory arts-based research project with Mountjoy Prison Inmates and Maynooth University in partnership with Gaisce - The President's Award

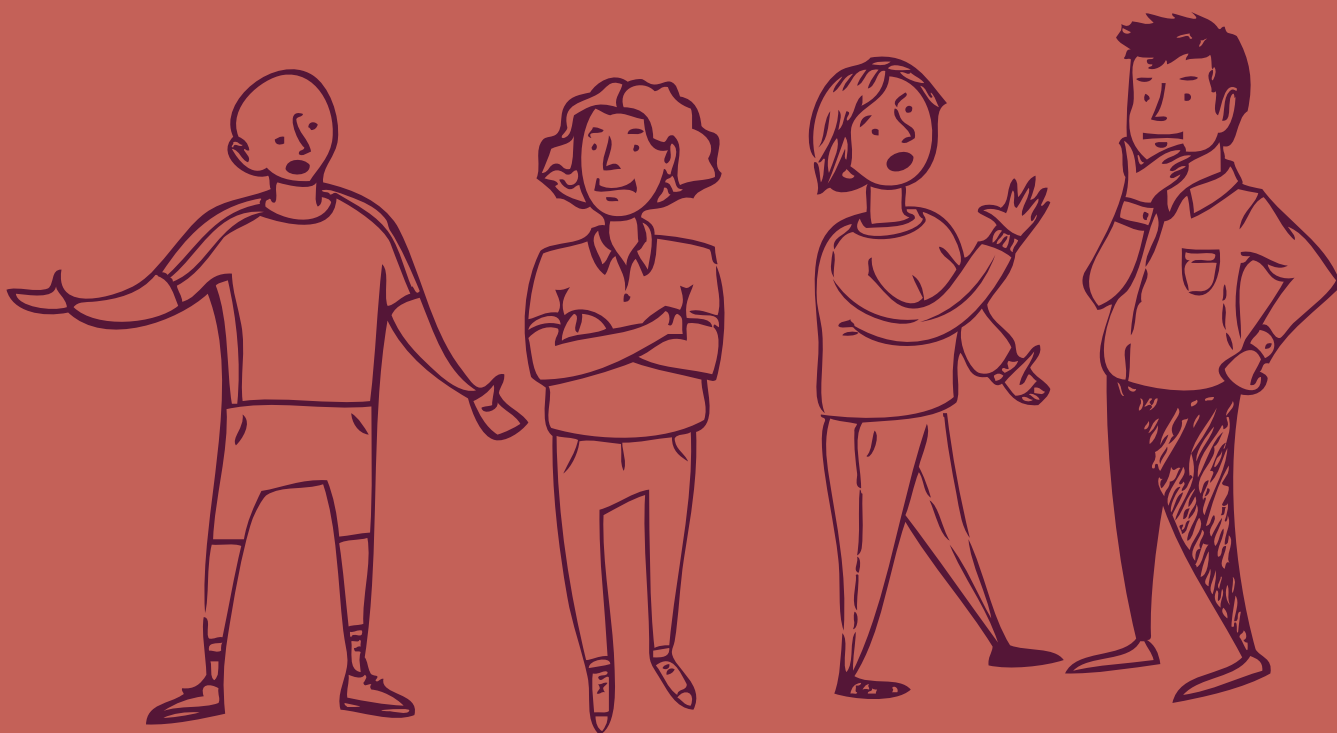


ABSTRACT

The Story Exchange Project is the first initiative from the Mountjoy Prison and Maynooth University Partnership in partnership with Gaisce - The President's Award. Young people incarcerated in Mountjoy Prison's Progression Unit and young people in Maynooth University, were brought together in Mountjoy Prison over the course of 6 months to work towards a Gaisce award. This report describes what happened...

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From the Irish Prison Service: Assistant Governor Donncha Walsh, Assistant Chief Officer William Fogarty, Governor Eddie Mullins, Chief Officer Mark Byrne, Warren, and all the prison officers who supported our coming into Mountjoy Prison over the course of the project. A special thanks also to all staff in the education unit in Mountjoy Prison, particularly Margaret Joyce and Anne Costelloe.

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Artist Eimear McNally for working with us to create the animation that accompanies this report.

Our very special thanks go to all the participants who gave so generously of their time and their stories.

None of this would not have been possible without you.

Foreword

Grace Edge, Manager, Maynooth University Access Programme

“ A University stands for humanism, for tolerance, for reason, for progress, for the adventure of ideas and for the search for truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards even higher objectives. ”

Jawaharlal Nehru December 1947

It is an uncomfortable and sobering fact that education, while providing a route out of crime can also provide a route into it. There were 4,209 people in prison custody in Ireland (28 February 2020), the majority of whom have never sat a state exam, with over half having left school before the age of 15. These rates are multiples of those in the wider population, where, for example, 90% of students complete the Leaving Certificate. The history of previous educational failure and negative educational experiences often combine to create powerful barriers to the successful re-integration of prisoners into the community.

It is widely acknowledged that the student body in higher education does not reflect the diversity of Irish society. National policy identifies specific ‘access’ groups, including people from lower socio-economic backgrounds, people with disabilities, Travellers, lone parents and mature students, as under-represented in third level. Put another way, and in the case of Mountjoy prison, people from some Dublin postcodes are traditionally over-represented in the prison population and under-represented in the third level student body. While the evidence clearly indicates that prisoners, former prisoners and people with convictions are most often drawn from access target groups, they remain strangely absent from national discourse on widening participation to higher education in Ireland.

International research highlights that prison communities benefit from engagement with universities, and vice-versa. In the UK for example, prison-university partnerships, providing additional educational opportunities to prisoners and

facilitating access to higher education, are common. These kinds of arrangements support the partner organisations to deliver their missions and enhance the educational offering for people in prison and on release. They are also tacit recognition of the untapped intelligence inside the criminal justice system. Maynooth University has a track record of commitment to social justice and has engaged with prisoners, former prisoners and the criminal justice community in a variety of ways for many years. This tradition contributed to the university explicitly naming ‘prisoners and former prisoners’ as an access target group in 2019 (the first Irish university to do so) and coincided with a successful application to the Public Service Innovation Fund (the Department of Expenditure and Reform) to establish Ireland’s first prison-university partnership with Mountjoy.

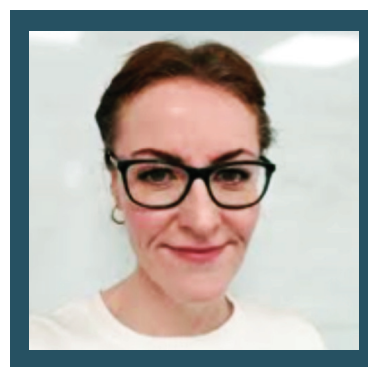
In the same year, and as part of the HEA-funded College Connect project, Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP) and partners in AIT, DkIT and DCU commissioned a Community Needs Analysis with students of the CDETB’s Pathways Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners to gather their views and insights on the factors that either encourage or discourage participation in higher education. One of the most important research findings centred on participants’ low self-esteem, their sense of shame about past experiences, and the stigma they associated with being a prisoner or former prisoner. Self-stigmatisation and societal stigma toward people with convictions (whose pernicious affects are well documented) combine to restrict access to educational opportunities and higher education. So when Gaisce - The President’s Award, invited MAP to collaborate on a new initiative in Mountjoy called the Story Exchange, bringing university students from diverse backgrounds together with inmates to foster connection, empathy and self-esteem, it resonated strongly with the findings of the Community Needs Analysis and provided an opportunity to support the development of the MJMU Partnership. The project also provided a vehicle to bring the university and the world of higher education into the life of the prison in a real way and create a space for peers to share their lived experiences and learn from each other. I’m very grateful to Gaisce who lead many aspects of the Story Exchange and who have an outstanding record of working with prisons and prisoners in Ireland, for affording the university this opportunity.

The Story Exchange Evaluation marks an important milestone for the MJMU Partnership, documenting as it does our first ‘formal’ partnership activity and

providing a mechanism to share collective learning across higher education, the criminal justice system and society generally. For me, one of the most important findings of this report relates to how the Story Exchange project, in addition to fostering connection between participants, also fostered a sense of connection, trust and common purpose, between Mountjoy and MU staff. These elements are vital if we are to realise our plans to harness the transformative power of education to build the diversity of the MU student body and support the reintegration of prisoners and former prisoners to our society.

I wish to thank all those involved in bringing this project and report to fruition. In particular, I must acknowledge Sarah Meaney, the report's author, whose approach to research brings energy, expertise, experience, authenticity and heart to this evaluation, and the animation which conveys its findings. Thank you to Mountjoy, in particular Gov. Walsh and ACO Willie Fogarty and all staff for everything you did to make this an enjoyable experience for all involved. To our colleagues in Gaisce, Marion Irwin Gowran, Niall Barrett and Marc Tuffy, for so generously sharing their knowledge and expertise of working with prisoners, and of course for facilitating the weekly sessions! Thank you too to the Public Service Innovation Fund and team at the Department of Expenditure and Reform for supporting the MJMU Partnership and this report.

Finally, thank you to all participants for giving of your time and yourself. Sharing stories with strangers is hard, but the 'magic' that happens when you connect with someone else, in a meaningful way, is a worthy reward. I hope the magic carries forward, helping to create communities where everyone has the opportunity to live out positive futures.

Introduction

Hi my name's Conor. Something that affects me to this day is my decision to go to college. When I was in school and stuff I wasn't really good at it, so I never thought about going to college or anything like that I just wanted to leave school. The only thing I really cared about was playing the guitar. And me English teacher was me counsellor as well, so he kept pushing me and telling me, 'Why not go to college? Sign up for Arts'. And I was thinking like maybe go to the army, but I didn't really hear about getting jobs, so then I actually went and made an application for college, and I'm doing a lot of things I didn't think I'd see only for him pushing me...

The Story Exchange Project was a 13-week intensive series of peer to peer empathy building workshops between inmates and university students to challenge stereotypes and create a sense of shared endeavour. It was the first concrete initiative of the partnership between the two institutions, Maynooth University and Mountjoy Prison. The project collaborated with Gaisce - The President's Award, to bring inmates and university students over 13 weeks. Using story exchange as a core methodology, the aim of the workshops accredited by Gaisce, was to support participants to develop their inter-personal skills, self-reflection and awareness capacity, confidence levels and self-esteem through examining their life experience in a different context.

Prisons and universities might not at first glance appear obvious allies, but they share common policy objectives. Universities are committed to widening access for groups who experience educational disadvantage, while for prisons, an emphasis is placed on delivering education that prepares for life after release and establishes an appetite and capacity for life-long learning. We know that education is a protective factor against re-offending, and a college qualification has been shown to have the strongest impact on reducing recidivism (Batiuk et al., 2005). The Department of Expenditure and Reform approved an application to the Public Service Innovation Fund to break down barriers between custody and the community and to support better reintegration for people with convictions into society through education,

through the establishment of a formal partnership between Mountjoy Prison and Maynooth University. Unlike in the UK, the USA and Canada, where prison and university partnerships are prevalent, this is the first cross-organisational strategic arrangement to exist in Ireland.

Peer-to-peer prison exchange programmes, where traditional college students and incarcerated students are partnered together for semester long learning, have grown into an international network over the last two decades. Until now, we are not aware of any similar programmes in an Irish context. While the Story Exchange Project differs from the programmes facilitated by our international colleagues, who bring inside and outside students together to study, both create a shared learning space in a prison environment where students and inmates can come together. We believe that by evaluating our experience on the Story Exchange Project, we can contribute and further existing literature on prison exchange programmes, that all share the principal goal of building bridges and solidarity.

This report details the background to the Story Exchange Project, and how it came about, as well as the steps we took and the methodology we used to evaluate and capture participant and stakeholders' expectations and experience of the project.

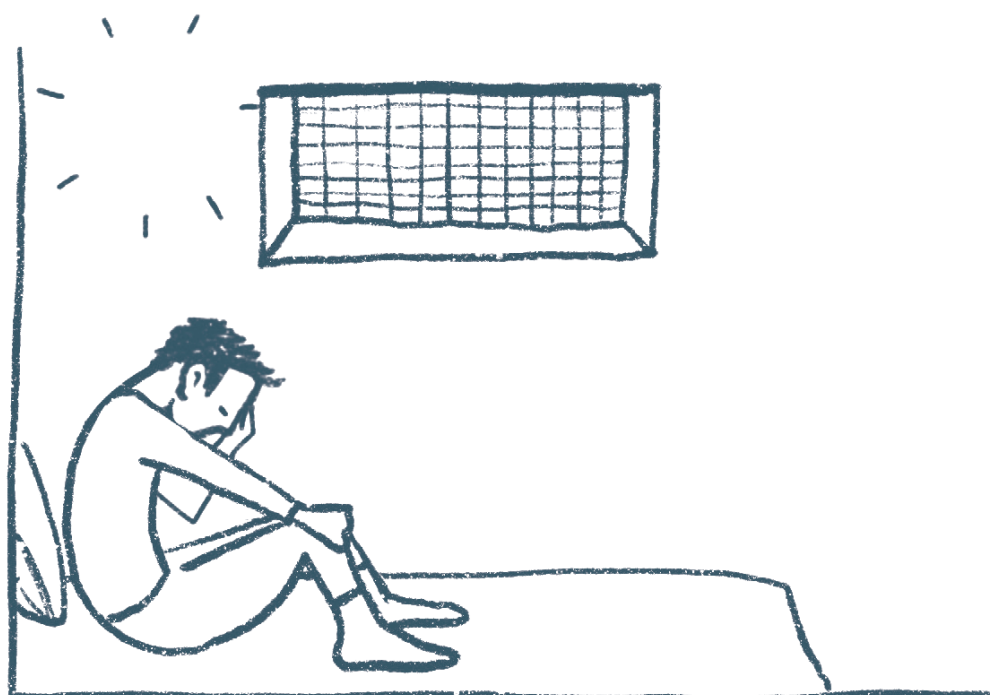
- **Part 1** provides the background to the Story Exchange Project and how it came to pass. Information on the stakeholders involved in the project is detailed in this section; Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit, Maynooth University Access Programme, Gaisce - The President's Award, and Narrative 4; the principal methodology used in the facilitation of the programme.
- **Part 2** details the research methodology employed to evaluate the project; researcher participation on story exchange workshops, focus groups with participants, collaborative arts-based methodology in the form of an animation, and interviews with principal stakeholders.
- **Part 3** documents the findings from focus group interviews, interviews with staff, and researcher observations and insight. This section is divided in three, and focuses on; expectations, experience, and recommendations.
- **Part 4**, the final section of the report, is a concluding chapter that summarises the evaluation report and points to 'what next'.

A story exchange is of itself a form of narrative inquiry, so it stands to reason that the evaluation approach employed here drew on narrative and arts-based methods to put forward what is intended to be a vicarious snapshot montage of what it was like to be involved on this innovative programme over the course of 6 months. As well as participating on the Story Exchange Project, both university and prison participants took part in the research element, including collaborating on a creative output for the project that took the form of an animation. Graphic harvester Eimear McNally worked with us to illustrate participants' description of the project and stories from the exchanges, to give a window into the learning and bonding that occurred during these workshops behind the prison walls. Kym MacLaren (2015) describes the process that happens when university students are brought together with individuals who are incarcerated as 'magical'. Magic is difficult to describe, particularly within the constraints of academic language that is most often assigned to and expected of reports. The Story Exchange Animation, together with narrative reflection in the Prologue and Epilogue of this report, are intended to invite you to share in the magic.

The Story Exchange Project animation without subtitles is available to watch here;

<https://youtu.be/xev7PuKrdCY>

A subtitled link is available on p.35



PROLOGUE

To get to the chapel in Mountjoy prison you have to first go through a corridor. This leads into a semi-circular cage-like structure with two upper floors. Through the metal grilles you can see the corridors or wings leading off to the left and right. The corridors are painted yellow, the bars white, and the metal cell doors lining either side are grey. Depending on the time of day, the doors may be open, and inmates could be congregated in the corridors and landings. The prison at these times is a noisy hub of activity. At other times, the cell doors may all be shut, and the only sound is that of officers marching back and forth and keys rattling.

You cross the circle to a narrow stair well, climb the stairs to the first floor, and then turn back on yourself to go around the barred landing in a semi-circle, back in the direction from which you came. It is disorientating. The far-side steps up to the chapel have double doors made of wood, a change from all the metal, and when you enter the room with its high ceilings, split levels and huge stained-glass windows, the effect is breath taking.

There are a group of 'lads' in their late teens or early twenties seated to the right as we enter, and Niall and Marc, the two young facilitators from Gaisce aren't instantly discernible. We however, as two female, middle-aged and middle-class university staff members are. We join the circle and awkward introductions are made. There is some shuffling and nervous sniggering before Niall and Marc take hold of the situation and set us to work. I'm paired with the only young man not wearing sports-clothes. 'I've just come from the kitchen' he explains, as I pull up my chair. Our topic for conversation is 'the first time I did something', and I experience a moment of panic as I wonder what on earth I am going to share with this complete stranger.

'I'm Darren' my partner offers politely, 'what's your name again?' Darren (pseudonym) thankfully agrees to go first and tells me about the first time he played for his school in Croke Park, and it doesn't take long before I

am with him. I am with him as he describes the feeling of coming onto the pitch through the tunnel, and of scoring for his team. I am with him as he speaks of his pride at being celebrated by the whole school and the school principal at the after-party, and I understand why to this day he keeps a small piece of turf from the field as a souvenir of a special day. And throughout his story, I am wondering how this boy with the long eyelashes, whose eyes are full of light at his childhood memory, has ended up in Dublin's largest prison.

When it comes to sharing our stories back to the main group, I go first. I introduce myself as Darren, 20 years old, and recount the first time I played in Croke Park for my primary school. I strive to retell the experience with all the details that matter to Darren because I am responsible for his story. It is like I have been entrusted with this very precious memory and I want to do it justice. When it is Darren's turn to speak, he introduces himself as Sarah, 45 years old. He tells the story of the first time I went skiing and nearly killed myself, making my way down a mountain Mr Bean style, using trees and barriers to slow my descent, while children, mini-pro ski champions, screeched with laughter as they sailed overhead on ski lifts. I notice how Darren's rendition of my story is a kinder version. While the story gets some laughs, he omits some of my details and retells it from a perspective that garners empathy towards my plight as opposed to ridicule.

A group enter the chapel sheepishly, and the conversations in the circle come to a halt. A huddle of terrified looking girls and guys are marshalled over to our space by the Progression Unit Governor, and I remember that they will have just walked through the cage. They are introduced as the Maynooth University students who will be joining the Mountjoy Progression Unit inmates every Friday for 13 weeks to take part in the Story Exchange Project. There is a self-conscious round of names and timid hand waves before the group is shepherded back out the doors for the rest of their prison tour. They will be starting next week.

1

PART ONE

The Story Exchange Project



1.1

Introduction to The Story Exchange Project

When you're reading stuff in the media or the news or online or whatever, you always get this image of what people who are in situations like this are like. But then when you come here it's completely different. It gets rid of that stigma.¹

The Story Exchange Project was a collaborative initiative between; Gaisce – The President's Award, Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit and Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP). The project ran from September 2019-March 2020 and brought together young people incarcerated in Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit, and university students in the Maynooth University Access Programme for 13 workshops. All of the university students entered Maynooth through a number of 'access' schemes, e.g. the Higher Education Access Route or Disability Access Route to Education and are also part of the MAP Ambassador Programme; a volunteering initiative which promotes equity of access to the university. Part of the Story Exchange Project involved collaborating as a team on a creative output to illustrate the project, which in this instance was an animation. Participants also participated in the research element of this project, which included their participating in focus group discussions about their experience of taking part on the project.

The Story Exchange used the Gaisce Award framework, and all participants were able to use the project towards obtaining a Gaisce Award. The award was not dependent on participation in the evaluation, which was voluntary. Narrative 4's story exchange is the primary facilitation tool that was used within the programme; a global initiative that aims to harnesses the power of story exchange to equip and embolden young adults to use their stories to build empathy and shatter stereotypes.

¹The use of quotes throughout is deliberately not being accredited to any individual, which is representative of the democratic communications of story exchange as explained in later sections.

The project was the first initiative of a partnership between Maynooth University and Mountjoy Prison, supported by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform through the Public Service Innovation Fund. The peer-to-peer aspect of the Story Exchange Project, that is the bringing together of university students and inmates to learn collaboratively has been happening on an International level in the form of programmes such as the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program (1997), Canada's W2B (Walls to Bridges) Programme (2011), and in the UK's Learning Together (2015). There are, however, no similar programmes that we are aware of in an Irish context. Furthermore, other programmes have involved students coming together to learn on a semester long university course, while the Story Exchange Project involved collaboration to achieve an award, with a specific focus on empathy-building and breaking down barriers. Nevertheless, this report draws on the literature pertaining to W2B, Inside-Out and Learning Together and makes a contribution to the field on programmes that facilitate dialogue across profound social difference.

1.2

The Project

You'd get some people saying, 'why are you doing that?' And you're like, 'you try and do it', you try and tell someone else's story!'



The Story Exchange Project brought together two seemingly disparate groups; university students and inmates, using the model of Narrative 4, in an attempt to promote understanding and break down barriers. Contemporary novelist Ian McEwan believes that story telling is not about teaching people how to live, but rather showing the possibility of what it is like to be someone else, which is the basis of all sympathy, empathy and compassion (Foster, 2007). Teaching about empathy is not the same as facilitating an empathic experience, which was the central premise of the Story Exchange as explained below.

After a series of warm-ups and icebreaker exercises, participants on the Story Exchange Project sat in a circle and shared stories, first in pairs and then to the general group. Of course, circle work, wherein participants sit in a circle and express themselves honestly while facing and listening carefully to one another, shares a kinship with Freire's (1998) culture circles and Aboriginal story circles (Baskin, 2005). It underpins Adult and Community Education, a basis that is both democratic and humanizing, and which Freire states are essential aspects for progressive social change. The Inside-Out model used in the prison-exchange programme internationally, also starts class in a large circle (Link, 2016). As does Canada's W2B, allowing everyone to have a voice in a formation so that no one person is perceived as having more power or knowledge than another (Fayter, 2016, p.64).

Narrative 4's story exchange method, expands on the notion of story-telling and circle work, by facilitating the literal and metaphorical stepping into another's shoes by telling another's story in the first person, a method designed to foster and facilitate empathy. 'A big part of the magic is witnessing someone else relay your story back to the wider group. It requires a little vulnerability but this feeds into an alchemy of sorts' (Ruairi McKiernan, cited in McGuire, The Irish Times, March 2020).

While prisons and universities may not immediately appear obvious bedfellows, both institutions see themselves as striving to positively transform and improve society by encouraging individuals to fulfil their pro-social potential (Ludlow et al., 2019). Mountjoy Prison's Progression Unit is committed to reducing reoffending behaviour; a college qualification has been shown to have the strongest impact on reducing recidivism (Batiuk et al., 2005), while university strategic plans also commit to widening access for people who have experienced social and educational

disadvantage. In the case of Maynooth University this also includes prisoners and former prisoners, who are formally named as a widening participation target group.

For Gaisce, the Story Exchange Project between Maynooth University students and Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit inmates was a pilot, and the first of its kind. Gaisce has been operating in Irish prisons for over 15 years, but this was the first pairing of inside and outside Gaisce participants. There were other key differences. A Gaisce Award is usually delivered by staff in the centre, who are trained as PALs (President's Award Leader). In the Story Exchange Project, albeit facilitated by Gaisce staff trained in Narrative 4, this was a peer-to-peer-approach.

They were their peers albeit on a different path.

Story Exchange Workshops were delivered between September 2019 and March 2020. The programme was structured over 13 weeks, with participants working in their separate groups for the first 3 weeks, before being brought together on week 4. Below is a brief outline as to the course structure:

■ **Workshops 1-3 - The Essentials**

Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit Participants, and Maynooth Ambassadors work separately to gain an understanding of the project.

■ **Workshops 4-6 – Building Group Dynamics**

The 2 groups come together with the focus on building the group cohesion through ice breakers and team building activities.

■ **Workshops 7-10 – Story Exchange**

The group begins the Narrative 4 process and starts to engage with storytelling and story exchange.

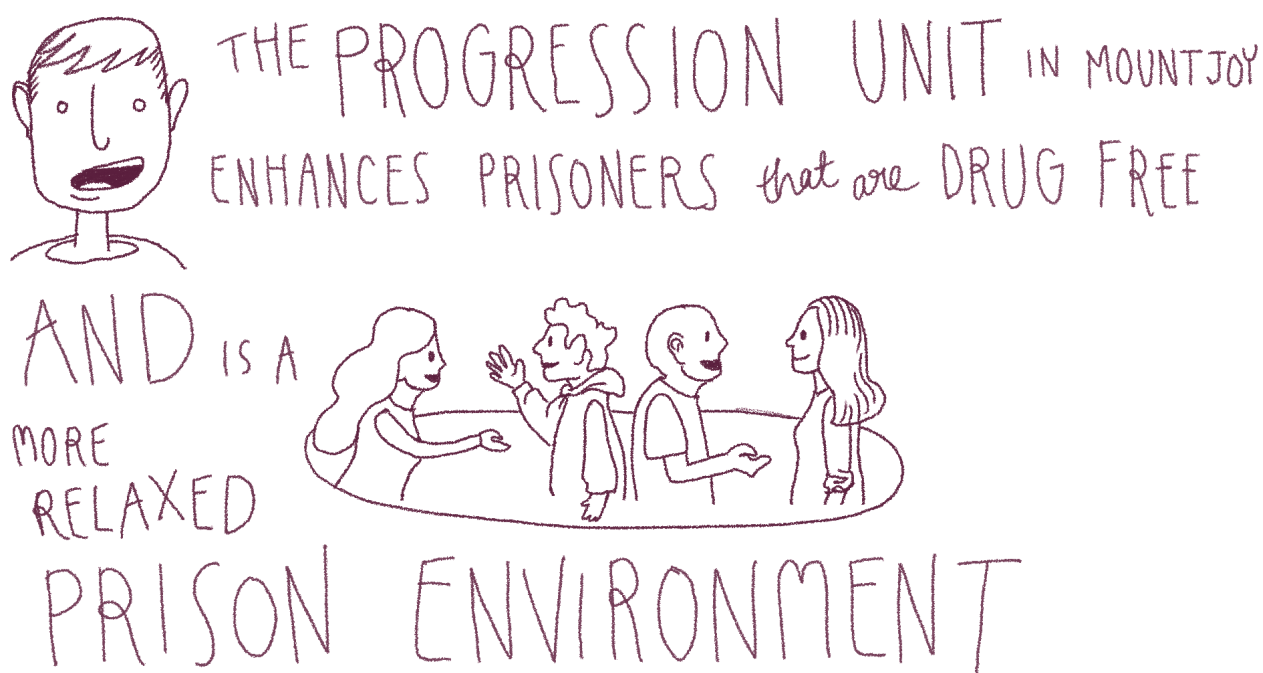
■ **Workshops 11-13 – Creative Output and Research**

The groups reflect on their experience and explore ideas around a creative output for the project and what that might look like.

1.3

Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit & Gaisce

Mountjoy Prison’s Progression Unit was the old St Patrick’s Institution (youth detention centre). St Patrick’s closed in 2017, and was renamed the Progression Unit, which as the name may suggest, caters for prisoners who want and who are eligible to engage in rehabilitation services that are available to them within the prison. The concept behind the Progression Unit is to work with prisoners in Mountjoy and other prisons deemed ready and able to start a rehabilitation process, with the intention that they might leave prison with something – a skill or a work placement, for example. The entire premise of the Unit is based on reducing recidivism (reoffending).



Gaisce - The President’s Award, is a programme for young people between the ages of 15 and 25 that has been in existence since 1985. The Awards began under the patronage of then President Patrick J. Hillery, and have been supported by each succeeding President since then. Over 377,000 young people have participated in the Gaisce programme; a personal development programme that acts as a

catalyst in the enhancement of positive psychological attributes of hope, happiness, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and psychological well-being in its participants (Clarke MacMahon & O'Reilley, 2015). Participants voluntarily choose to participate in the non-competitive programme, which has four components; Community Involvement, Personal Skill, Physical Recreation, and Adventure Journey with the support of a President's Award Leader (PAL) at Bronze, Silver and Gold level.

Gaisce has been operating in Irish Prisons since 2004, beginning in St Patrick's Institution. Many young people enter custody believe they are worthless. Most prisoners have had negative experiences of mainstream education including experiences of early school leaving and expulsions (Carrigan, 2013). For many participants in custody, a Gaisce Award is the first positive recognition they have ever received (Fergal Black, Director of Care & Rehabilitation IPS, in Healy, 2018, p.1). To date close to 300 awards have been presented to individuals across the Prison Estate at Bronze, Silver and Gold levels.

To some extent they have closed doors themselves, and suddenly doors are opened 'oh you can do this' and even the smallest chink of light can often be enough to motivate them to go on and do something else.

The link between self-esteem and criminality has long been explored (Morley & Fulton, 2019), and the late K. J. Lang, long-serving Director General of the prison system in Finland, said, 'all our efforts when organizing correctional services should be analysed as to their ability to support, uphold and redress the self-esteem of the prisoner' (Lang, 1993 cited in (Costelloe & Warner, 2014, p.181). The sense of engagement and personal achievement that comes from undertaking an Award programme like Gaisce, can help to restore self-esteem and act as a stimulus to engage fully in prison services (David Stanton, T.D. Minister of State for Equality, Immigration and Integration in Healy, 2018, p. 6), and Gaisce participants' testimonies of undertaking an award while in custody, points to a transformative experience that can be both life changing and life-saving.

Lads deemed to be difficult would be participating in things, engaging, conversations would be easier. I don't think it's just Gaisce, I think it's someone taking the time out to engage with them and there seems to be a real positive return on that.

The Story Exchange was able to be used by participants towards the Community Involvement aspect of their Gaisce award. Community Involvement, as the name implies, involves giving back to the community, and as most prisons engage with outside charities, in terms of Community Involvement activities there tends to be no shortage. The Buddy Dogs Programme, in which inmates train dogs for a year before going to children with disabilities is one such example. Filling envelopes with sunflower seeds to sell or making something at the bequest of a charity such as a bench or fence, or hosting a Christmas party for elders are others. One Gaisce participant in Wheatfield Prison as part of his Gold award, compiled a booklet on the charities that have benefitted from the work of Wheatfield prison, thus marking out some of the good work that prisons do and providing a much needed and alternative discourse to the one most often touted by media depicting the entire prison population as dangerous, violent, and a threat to the public (Costelloe & Warner, 2014).

Gaisce has relied very much on champions within the Irish prison system to promote its award, and Marion Irwin Gowran, project manager at Gaisce, cites Mountjoy Prison's Assistant Governor Donncha Walsh as 'possibly one of the greatest champions for Gaisce in the prison system'. In 2018, Gaisce, the Irish Prison Service in association with the Duke of Edinburgh's Award/Joint Award initiative organised a Symposium 'The Award in Custody – A Shared Perspective', hosted in the Progression Unit in Mountjoy. One of the recommendations from the symposium was that prisoners be given more ownership for their own Gaisce journey (Healy, 2018, p. 9). Following consultation with Assistant Governor Walsh and the previous year's Gaisce Award Participants in Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit, who questioned if there was parity between their experience of acquiring the Gaisce Award and the experience of those who undertake the award outside a prison setting, the initial idea for a Gaisce award that brought together Progression Unit inmates and university students was conceived .

1.4

Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP) & MAP Ambassadors

In early 2019 Gaisce approached Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP) to explore the possibility of teaming up Maynooth University students and Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit inmates, to obtain their Gaisce awards together. MAP encourages under-represented groups, such as early school leavers, mature students, students with disabilities and members of the Irish Traveller community, to enter third level, and provides these groups with support through their time at Maynooth University. In line with the National Plan for equity of access in higher education, which specifies recruiting a student body that reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population, under the MU strategic plan 2018-2022, prisoners and former offenders are specifically named as a widening participation target group (p.45).

MAP runs a programme of activities aimed at removing barriers to progression to higher education and annually recruits volunteers, who act as role models and mentors to support its activities. The MAP Ambassador Programme is a volunteer programme set up by MU Student Advisor Gemma Lynch, and Access Outreach Officer Martha Brandes in 2015. MAP Ambassadors come from a range of backgrounds and have all come to the university through a variety of access admissions schemes. MAP Ambassadors are often the first in their family to have gone to college; some have come through DEIS schools (Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools); schools that are designated as serving communities identified as disadvantaged, and which show a significant gap in achievement and attainment in comparison to Non-Deis schools in Ireland (Pollak, 2019). Social background continues to be a crucial factor in the degree of academic attainment at second level in Ireland, with private schools dominating the upper end of rankings (Ó Caollaí & Mooney, 2019), and with the added value of a network that 'has a lot of weight behind it' (Reddan, 2019). The skill set acquired from being an Ambassador along with references and awards such as the MUSE award, (Maynooth University Student Experience); an award that is acknowledged on degree transcripts, adds weight to CVs and carries currency with employers. Employers stress the value

of extra-curricular activities for distinguishing candidates, providing evidence of cultural fit and leadership (Stuart et al., 2011). Gaisce develops important skills such as teamwork, problem solving, coaching others, and leadership (Clarke MacMahon & O'Reilly, 2015), and is another award that carries currency with employers. As such it was seen as a way of complementing the MAP Ambassador Programme, and Gemma Lynch subsequently trained as a President's Award Leader (PAL).

1.5 Gaisce, MAP & Mountjoy

When Gaisce approached MAP with the proposal of a collaboration with Mountjoy Prison participants, MAP had just supported a research project with prisoners and former prisoners around barriers and access to higher education as part of College Connect Project (funded by the Higher Education Authority). One of the findings from the research was that this cohort experiences a high-level of stigmatization, both self and societal (Meaney, 2019). The Story Exchange Project seemed to afford an opportunity to bring the university into the prison in a very tangible but informal way, that had the potential to introduce higher education in a manner that went almost 'under the radar' and to address stigma and stigmatization for both sets of participants.

You're not going in with your pull up posters, and 'here's some information about a course'.

Meetings began at Gaisce in Ratra house, risk assessments were carried out by Maynooth University and Mountjoy prison on their respective sides. MAP Ambassadors were selected by Gemma Lynch, who reached out to about 100 Level 2 ambassadors (more experienced ambassadors). A large and positive response was received, which was narrowed down and refined to criteria such as who would most benefit from this experience such as Law or Sociology students. Gender balance was also considered, and a schedule was drawn up, the first 3 weeks of which involved MAP ambassadors being trained separately to Mountjoy Prison Progression Unit inmates. Workshops took place in the Chapel in Mountjoy Prison in Dublin on Friday afternoons, facilitated by two experienced Gaisce facilitators trained in Narrative 4.

1.6

Narrative 4

The whole power of the story exchanges is when you tell their story and pretend to be the other person and that's when it clicks, it's like 'Ohhhh, this is why...'



Narrative 4, a global initiative with its headquarters in New York and its first physical space in Limerick, is led by cofounders Lisa Consiglio and Colum McCann. Narrative 4 is a model for social change based on the belief that we can see the world and ourselves differently by exchanging personal narratives in a new and enlightened manner. Story exchanges work by bringing people to a distraction-free space where they are randomly partnered. They are asked to tell a story from their life, perhaps a story that might show the essence of who they are. When they are regrouped, they retell their partner's story in the first person.

The programme has expanded through the US and is now working in South Africa, Mexico, Palestine and elsewhere. Narrative 4 has an impressive portfolio of collaborative projects, the aim of which is to encourage equality and empathy building, and to challenge judgemental or stereotypical opinions between incongruent groups. High School students collaborated with the NYPD and used Narrative 4 to help begin to shatter the stereotypes urban youth feel towards police, and vice versa. In Limerick, 'Boy's Stories' partnered primary school boys with men in their community to explore questions and stereotypes about masculinity, and in downtown Manhattan, members of the LGBTQ+ community, who have been bullied, sat down with members who have bullied others.

1.7

Mountjoy Prison Campus & Maynooth University Partnership

It's about inclusiveness and offering an alternative to our lads, that alternative being that there is places for you in Higher Education and in Maynooth University if you apply yourself correctly and the door won't be shut. There is a door open for you to develop as a person, and as an alternative to crime.

In 2019, Maynooth University Access Programme (MAP) supported a participatory action research project (PAR) to find out how to better support prisoners and former prisoners access and progress through 3rd level (Meaney, 2019). The recommendations from the research helped support targeted action response, but a significant subsidiary outcome was the building on relationships and connections that were already in existence between the two institutions; Mountjoy Prison Campus and Maynooth University. What came to light, was that while there were many individuals both inside and outside of the prison and university striving to improve the

educational prospects for people with previous convictions, this was largely occurring in silos, so without an overall picture as to what was happening on a communal level.

There was a lot of work happening in the university with prisoners, former prisoners and people with previous convictions, but none of it was joined up.

In 2019, Grace Edge, the MU Access Office Manager, spoke to Assistant Governor Walsh about the possibility of connecting and developing the various strands of prevailing work and charting their direction through the establishment of a reciprocal educational partnership between the two institutions. The Public Service Innovation Fund, through the Department of Expenditure and Public Reform, supported a proposal to build that partnership. Edge and Walsh worked together to bring key people from both institutions around a table in Mountjoy Prison to map out partnership objectives. The result was a charter, committing to an enduring partnership to build the diversity of the third level student population whilst supporting the reintegration of prisoners and former prisoners to society.

Though still in its infancy, prior to the Covid 19 pandemic, activities had commenced under the partnership agreement to support engagement by the university within the space of the prison and vice versa. A science and technology lecture series, facilitated by acclaimed university academics, took place in both the progression unit and in the main jail. A reciprocal large-scale and jam-packed event was hosted in the university, where Governor Eddie Mullins and a prisoner of Mountjoy currently studying at 3rd level, addressed attendees on the subject of the prison as 'home'.

The interchange of learning between the two organisation serves to deepen understanding of how each operates, and thereby create a space where it is possible to enable the development and provision of education pathways between the two. The establishment of a network on both the inside and the outside, facilitates the support of learners with convictions in a manner that reflects the learning from both sides, particularly in terms of the challenges involved in the process of reintegration.

Both organisations, through their cooperation, have been able to take measures that might previously have been difficult to imagine. This includes the move on behalf of the the Director General of the Irish Prison Service to grant inmates access to online resources and tutorials, and the establishment of the Unlocking Potential Project, to redevelop admissions policies and practises for people with serious convictions by developing a fair admissions toolkit to guide HEIs.

The Story Exchange Project, and the bringing together of inmates and university students to achieve a mutual goal, was the first peer initiative of the partnership. Facilitated and conceived by Gaisce, its inception was supported by peer-researchers from the needs analysis with prisoners and former prisoners (Meaney, 2019), who input into the project at the development stages. Its evaluation upholds the commitment of the partnership in its objective to 'evaluate and share the learning', both with other prisons and universities, and with wider society as a whole.



1.8

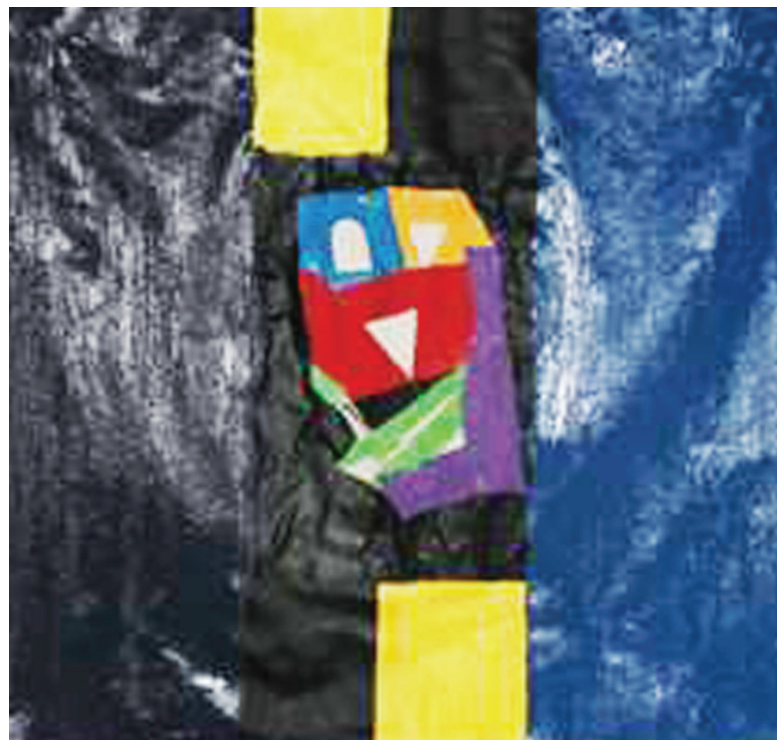
Mountjoy Prison Campus & Maynooth University Partnership - Visual Identity

Award-winning artist Jimmy Leonard was approached to develop a visual identity for the Mountjoy Prison Campus and Maynooth University partnership. Leonard, who discovered his passion for painting while in prison under the tutelage and mentorship of fellow artist Brian Maguire, came through the Pathways Education Centre for Prisoners and Former Prisoners. He is currently in the final year of a Masters in fine art in NCAD and is a keen advocate for the transformative value of art and education.

The design brief was to create a visual identity that would sit alongside the Mountjoy Aul

Triangle Logo and the Maynooth University logo as a visual representation of the partnership between the two organisations. Leonard created an oil painting of an abstract owl using colours inspired by the Maynooth University crest, and a quote attributed to artist Michael Cullen; 'the painter paints the future'.

In Egyptian hieroglyph's the meaning for M is an owl, and there are many stories in various cultures referring to the owl as the wise one who mediates between the different animals in the forest. It is also known to be a symbol of wisdom, knowledge, learning and good judgement.

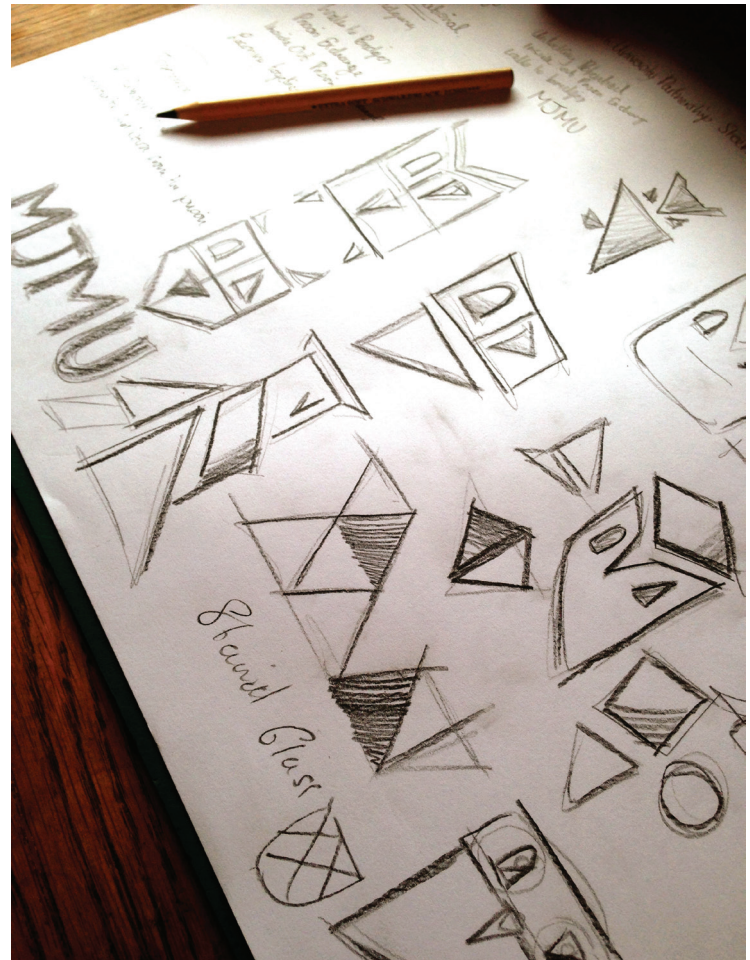


1.8 Mountjoy Prison Campus & Maynooth University Partnership - Visual Identity

Graphic designer and illustrator Susan Meaney drew on the vibrant colours and geometric style of Leonard's original oil painting to create options for a visual identity. The painting reminded her of a stained-glass image; a prominent feature of Mountjoy Prison in rooms such as the Chapel. The feel of stained glass together with the ancient tangram puzzles, where 7 geometric pieces are used to create innumerable different possible shapes, was incorporated into her designs.

The steering committee of the Mountjoy Prison Campus and Maynooth University Partnership, that includes representation from the prisoner body and the prison education units, along with other relevant stakeholders were invited to select from a series of options.

This is the first public presentation of the visual identity that was chosen to represent the partnership going forward.



2

PART TWO

Evaluating The Story Exchange Project



2.1

The Research Methodology

The methodological approach for the evaluation of the Story Exchange was influenced by participatory arts research. As the researcher on the project, I participated on some of the Story Exchange workshops, as well as carrying out focus groups with participants and facilitating the creative output element to this project. I do not class the methodology as participatory research however, as participants did not contribute to designing or leading workshops (Bland, 2017); but we were attentive to power relations, engaged in reflexivity, and intended participation to be empowering.

I organised focus group discussions with Mountjoy Progression Unit Participants and Maynooth Ambassadors to reflect on the experience. 17 participants began the Story Exchange Project; 9 university students, and 8 prison participants. By the end of the programme there were 13; 8 from the university and 5 from the Progression Unit, all of whom took part in focus group discussions. Of the 13, there were 5 female and 8 male participants, all in the 18 to 24-year age bracket as per the requirements of Gaisce. While the unevenness in the ratio of university to prison participants was to some extent disappointing, it was not unexpected. The Progression Unit, as the name suggests, aims to facilitate the progression of prisoners back into society, and prisoners are often transferred to minimum-security institutions to prepare for release. In the case of Gaisce, every effort is made to support completion of the award in another facility should a transfer occur.

There were two facilitated and recorded sessions with Story Exchange participants. In the first, participants took part in a semi-open discussion about their experience of the project, which had three stages; expectations around the project, experience on the project, and recommendations for how things might be done differently or improved. The second research session involved the recording of a story exchange, that participants were aware would be edited and used to present and describe the project in an animated form. The idea of the animation was first pitched to participants, who after giving consent, were facilitated to contribute a shared description of the project on an audio recording.

6 stakeholders also took part in the research; 2 from Maynooth University Access Programme, 2 from Gaisce, and 2 from the Progression Unit. Two of these conversations were paired interviews that took place remotely; the first via Microsoft Teams and the second as a conference call. The remaining two were individual interviews, one of which took place face-to-face prior to Covid 19 lockdown, and the other which took place online.

Every effort was made in the development of the research element of the Story Exchange Project to ensure that the process was as positive and rewarding an experience as possible for participants and acted as a compliment to the project through the use of dialogical, democratic and participative methodology. As such, the research focussed on capturing three linked elements; participation on the Story Exchange, the creation of a creative output, and focus group and individual interviews.



There were two focus groups scheduled to take place with participants in their individual groups after the project had wrapped up. It was intended that this would offer a space where individuals could reflect and de-brief after their experience. It was also to give each group the opportunity to voice their opinions more freely. 10 days before the first of these focus groups was due to take place, Ireland entered lockdown due to the Covid 19 pandemic. While it would have been possible to facilitate an online focus group with the university participants, this would have been

extremely difficult if not impossible to organise with the prison group and could therefore have resulted in an imbalanced representation of participant voice. So, unfortunately neither of these focus groups went ahead.

On the 12th March in Mountjoy Prison's chapel there was an awards event held to celebrate the project and to present participants with their Gaisce awards. Prison participants were permitted to bring four family members to the event, and Maynooth Ambassadors were permitted to bring two. At 11AM on the 12th March, Taoiseach Leo Varadkar announced the beginning of lockdown with the closure of schools, colleges and childcare. The decision was reluctantly taken to cancel Maynooth University's participation at the event, which went ahead for the participants in Mountjoy Progression Unit, but which was summed up emotively by Assistant Governor Walsh;

We did go ahead with that afternoon. There was something missing. The lads were very disappointed. They wanted to share that day between both sets of families, between both groups. It was like the wedding without the bride.

The lockdown as a result of Covid 19 indisputably disrupted some of our plans for the Story Exchange Project, as well as preventing elements of the evaluation. Nevertheless, fieldnotes, prison participants' and university participants' story exchange, the evaluation of focus group interviews, and arts-based methodology combine to put forward a robust and thorough research evaluation and documentation of this project. Participating in workshops afforded me the opportunity to pursue co-construction of knowledge in line with the metaphor of researcher as 'traveller' rather than tourist (Hinton-Smith et al., 2018). My reflections on elements of my participation are captured intermittently and in narrative form through the report in the Prologue and Epilogue, affording a space where the reader can be invited to vicariously share in an experience, a space where imagination is a prerequisite and which traditional academic forms can fail to engender.

2.2

The Story Exchange Animation

Story Exchange Storyboard



...which involves us pairing off into groups and exchanging stories that are true and personal.



We come back and tell each other's stories as that person.



It's not like we are just university students and people in prison - we are all on the same level here. We are making connections and understanding different communities.

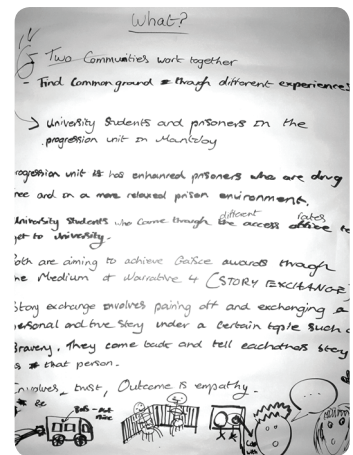
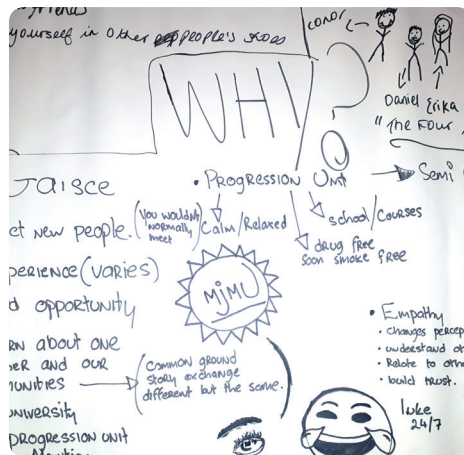
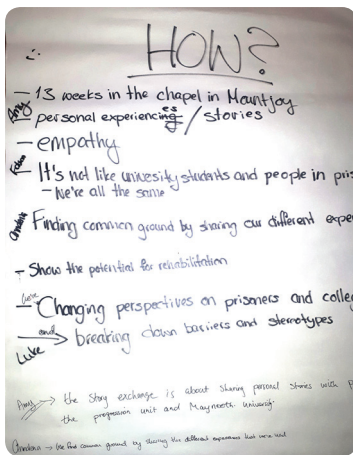


We find common ground by sharing different experiences that we have had. Making new friends. Putting yourself in other people's shoes.

Employing the arts in social inquiry can give those involved in the research process insight into their own lives and identities, allowing them to see themselves differently and to share their stories with an audience that is afforded a glimpse into the lives of other human beings (Foster, 2007, p.25). The creative output that emerged from the Story Exchange Project for public dissemination, is intended to foster empathy and encourage understanding. Arts-based practices can be used as a means of creating critical awareness or raising consciousness, important in social justice-oriented research that seeks to reveal power relations, often invisible to those in privileged groups (Leavy, 2009, p.13). Prisons are usually portrayed in the media or on television as either violent hellholes or holiday camps for pampered inmates. The Story Exchange animation offers a glimpse of the goings on inside a prison that many prison educators would be familiar with, but which many members of the public would not.

The creative element of the project involved two separate sessions, both of which took place in Mountjoy Prison. The first involved teasing out the benefits of using a creative device to capture the Story Exchange, followed by the audio recording of participants describing the project. This was easier said than done, and the group was split into three smaller groups and worked together on flip charts in an attempt to articulate the 'what', 'why', and 'how' of the project.

I didn't understand the story exchange thing at all. They tried to explain it but it's really hard to explain.



Following on from this, participants chose a line or phrase from the flipchart they had been working on that best summed up their sense of the Story Exchange and what it meant. This was audio recorded, edited, and used to form the intro to the animation.

The second session on the creative output piece, involved the artist Eimear McNally joining us for a workshop. Icebreakers were used in every session to decrease the palpable tension and tentativeness in the room and give participants the opportunity to get to know each other, and the group engaged in their usual warm-up activities and games prior to beginning the story exchange. This session was also audio-recorded, and Eimear, who is what is known as a 'Graphic Harvester', drew the conversation as doodle pictures or cartoons onto large white sheets taped to the walls. The technique, which originated in the community sector as a means of catching the energy, takeaways, or inputs from workshops and meetings goes by many names; graphic recording, visual scribing, visual note-taking essentially involves illustrating the most important topics to capture the gist or essence, so fitted

perfectly with the concept of the Story Exchange Project. The audio of the recorded story exchanges was then edited, and Eimear began work on storyboarding the audio for the animation. The result was a four-and-a-half-minute animation, featuring authentic participant voice, to illustrate the project and to be able to share the work in an engaging manner transferable in a wide variety of contexts.

Story Exchange Storyboard



Hi my name is Luke. When I first arrived into jail I didn't really have much aspiration, I didn't really know exactly what I wanted to do.



Hi my name is Fionnuala and a decision that has impacted me to this day is my decision to attend college.



I dropped out of school at a very young age and I just decided that I wanted to better myself while I was in prison so I could get a job when I finish. So I'm doing maths, English, art and computers. And computers are my favourite.



When I was making this decision, my mental health wasn't in the best place and I didn't get my first choice in my CAO which devastated me.

The Story Exchange Project animation with subtitles is available to watch here;

<https://youtu.be/JYMTg5mY1ig>

3

PART THREE

The Findings



The findings in this section are discussed under three main headings; Expectations around the project, Experience of participation, and Recommendations. Each heading incorporates participant feedback as well as contribution from the stakeholders. With this structure we can put forward an evaluation of the project's success in terms of participation, as well as affording the opportunity to reflect on what we would do differently given the opportunity. It is hoped that this section will be significant both in terms of capturing the efficacy of the project, and by sharing the results of a pilot project that has the potential to be replicated across other prisons and universities.

3.1 Participant Expectations

Participants on the story Exchange Project were interviewed about their expectations of participation post-project. Unfortunately, due to ethical clearance, which was secured at the last minute, it was not possible to discuss and meet up with participants prior to the project starting, which would have provided evidence of how attitudes had shifted or altered. That said, preconceptions of college students were explored with prison participants, prior to the two groups coming together as part of the preparation for the project.

When we were working with prisoners on their own, we did a word association game and some of the lads said 'posh'.

Research on other projects also indicate retrospectively that many typically join initially harbouring fears and assumptions about people in the other group, despite good intentions to the contrary (MacLaren, 2015, p.373). Inmates have expressed particular concern that students from outside would think they were unintelligent and /or dangerous and that they would be regarded as 'other' (Pollack, 2016, p.8). On the Story Exchange Project, university participants spoke retrospectively about having expected there would be an atmosphere of distrust and awkwardness between the two groups.

I thought we'd all be like really suspicious of each other.

I thought...we'd all just be sitting in a circle, like, looking awkwardly at each other.

Interestingly, this could have been a projection of what was anticipated by stakeholders, as it was clear that both groups picked up on this. Risk management strategies are to be expected in programmes such as this and address possible contingencies regarding student safety and inappropriate conduct of both groups of participants (Martinovic, Liddell & Muldoon, 2018). Nevertheless, it is worth considering the impact of strategies such as risk assessments on participant's initial perceptions of one another, and how they might serve to fuel the negative and biased mindset and thought patterns that programmes such as the Story Exchange Project are purporting to be dismantling.

The guy came to speak to us ... he made it seem so serious, like really scary.

They were nearly fearful about us coming in here and how much we shared.

It is also worth noting that these thoughts and comments once expressed were met with much laughter from both groups, indicating not so much that these initial fears were unfounded, but that they had been overcome. Programmes such as Inside-Out, W2B and Learning Together, all report a breaking down of barriers and stereotypes when groups work together (Pollack, 2016; MacLaren, 2015; Ludlow, Armstrong & Bartels, 2019). A comparison could be drawn here with the Story Exchange Project, where preconceptions and their subsequent dismantling were summed up succinctly by one prison participant;

It's not just poshies who go to college, and we're not all scumbags in jail.

Most participants spoke of not knowing what to expect when they signed up to participate on the Story Exchange Project. Some mentioned that the initial concept seemed almost over simplistic and childish, and words such as ‘patronizing’ and ‘stupid’ arose when describing reaction to first hearing about the project.

It sounds patronizing. ‘Oh, we sit down, and we tell each other stories’. It sounds so stupid until you do it.

Yet listening to others’ stories and telling one’s own can be a collective sowing of the seeds of education, though it might be difficult to see this initially as we are mistakenly conditioned to see education in terms of acquiring stocks of knowledge from experts (MacLaren, 2015). Freire (1998) described this as the Banking model and advocated for embracing lived experience as legitimate sources of knowledge. The pedagogy embraced in the Story Exchange Project, which used a methodology similar to that of the other prison exchange programmes; Inside-Out, W2B and Learning Together, consider the instructor a facilitator and work to destabilise power relations between facilitator and participant and between participants themselves.

3.2 Stakeholder Expectations

For the stakeholders, the expectations of the project were more clear-cut, and could be divided into two main themes; expectations for participants, and expectations for the organisation. In terms of expectation for participants, stakeholders spoke about empathy education, and challenging stereotypes, as well as building self-esteem and opening possibilities.

It was to bring the peer-groups together and to break down barriers and stereotypes and show prisoners what students are and vice versa.

A lot of what we were finding out about the higher-ed. needs of prisoners was that prisoners felt a lot of self-stigma, and the Gaisce project and the Story Exchange seemed to be a way that we could address that self-stigma.

You might be from a disadvantaged area, you might not have finished school, but you're doing the same award as the guy who might have got 500 marks in his Leaving Cert.

With regard to expectations for the organisations, stakeholders were also clear as to the benefits they felt could be garnered from collaboration. While at first glance higher education and criminal justice organisations seem unlikely collaborators, there are significant shared objectives. Universities are committed to improving access to higher education for people who come from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, and strong emphasis is placed on providing learning opportunities within prison that are comparable with those in the community (Ludlow, Armstrong & Bartels, 2019).

We have been doing the Gaisce Award for the last 16 years but in a kind of a silo, behind the walls of a prison, so to make it more transparent that we're doing the same award, the same programme as in a college.

For HE institutions we all have our targets to meet and we all want to widen participation and we talk a lot about intersectional disadvantage, and I think you'd be pushed to find a group with a higher level of intersectional disadvantage than prisoners.

Stakeholders also spoke enthusiastically of the sense that they were embarking on something novel in an Irish context. In addition to the shared notion that new ground was being broken, a shared belief in the value of the project came across strongly in interview conversations across the board.

It's been done in other parts of the world. There's no reason why it can't be done in Ireland.

The Progression Unit were amazing in bringing in an external group. It was a risk for them.

The approach we were taking that we were allowing external people work alongside lads here to achieve the same award. The response and the feedback we got has been phenomenal.

3.3

Experience of the Story Exchange Project for Participants

Participants were unanimously positive about their experience of participation on the Story Exchange Project. Conversations during the focus groups were hugely animated with many people speaking at once. There was also plenty of joking and good-natured teasing of each other, highlighting the ease between the two groups.

The time flies by when you're in here...

Yeah? Wanna swap?
(Everyone laughs)

The process of entering into dialogue, and becoming good interlocutors, is itself an important learning activity, a transformative experience (MacLaren, 2015, p. 380). Paulo Freire (1998) claimed that dialogue is the essence of education as the 'practice of freedom' (p. 75). Maynooth students spoke about being surprised at the positivity of the Progression Unit participants, not just in their dialogue with one another, but in their general attitudes, and how this caused them to consider the privilege of freedom and how they take this for granted.

They were up there every Friday at 2.15PM waiting for the programme to start which was something unusual for us to witness.

Low self-esteem and lack of confidence are continually highlighted as issues for many of the prison population, and researchers have long debated the relationship between low self-esteem and crime (Morely & Fulton, 2020, p. 101). On top of this, self-stigmatization; experienced by many incarcerated or formerly incarcerated individuals, that manifests as low self-esteem, can create additional personal barriers to reintegration into society (Evans et al., 2017). This combines to result in a sense of unworthiness that can pose further barriers in terms of deciding whether to pursue education in the first place (Meaney, 2019, p. 48). Ironically, low self-esteem and self-stigmatization can be resisted through the empowerment and motivation enhanced by education (Evans et al., 2017).

Both the prison and Gaisce facilitators remarked on the increased confidence they witnessed in prison participants as a result of the Story Exchange Project, which was exhibited in a change of attitudes towards college and educational progression.

Guys that wouldn't have been talking about furthering their education or furthering their opportunities about going to Maynooth or any higher ed. college have started a conversation.

To see college as an option for them, to see Maynooth as an option, to see any college as an option is huge.

...at that point they would never have seen themselves as ever being able to become a student.

Some of the change in attitude was attributed to an increased sense of confidence, but also was put down to the interaction with the college students and the dialogue that was occurring within the space. A change in the perception of college students was also seen as contributing to a more open attitude towards higher education institutions.

The lads were saying, 'Oh I could never go to college', and the ambassadors were saying, 'I used to think that myself, and I'm the first in my family'.

They've seen that the students are normal people that weren't born with a silver spoon in their mouth and they've had challenges themselves.

3.4 Stakeholder's Experience of the Story Exchange Project

While the partnership between Gaisce and The Irish Prison Service has been in establishment since 2004, the relationship between Mountjoy Prison and Maynooth University is a fledgling one, with the Story Exchange Project the first initiative of that partnership. Due to the populations and stakeholders involved, pitching and introducing an idea like The Story Exchange Project to the decision makers at all three institutions required careful planning and patience.

It took a lot of foresight and thinking outside the box to go to this level.

It involved quite a commitment.

All of the stakeholders spoke positively about the experience of facilitating the Story Exchange Project, despite the considerable time and effort that went in to setting it up. This was evident in the willingness on the behalf of all three partner institutions to explore the possibility of repeating the process, and of attempting to model it and capture its success for the benefit of other institutions.

I think there's space for the story exchange to run again, it has replicability.

I'd love to see it rolled out across prisons where possible. What has come out of it has been so positive.

I would do it again. I've no doubt that this will become the norm here in the Progression Unit.

There was also a sense among stakeholders that there was a scope for future collaboration on other similar projects, and that the Story Exchange was a pilot that could be seen as paving the way for this.

Having this process captured and showing that this has been a really positive initiative, I hope will encourage Higher Education Institutions to want to do more work in prisons more broadly.

We have to make time for it, there was lot of good commitment from both sides to make sure this thing worked.

We need to build on this success.



3.5

Recommendations from Participants

Participants were asked what if anything could have been done differently to improve the project, and if they would recommend that it be run again.

Regarding the project being replicated and running again, the feedback from both groups was exceedingly positive.

If you get a chance to do it, do it!

It should be way more widespread.

I'd say if you ever want to do it again, you'd have a lot of people who will want to do it.

Similarly, feedback on the organisation of the project was generally very positive. University participants confirmed that the timetabling of the project took into account their other commitments, and prison participants affirmed that their activities such as school and family visits were unaffected by their participation on Friday afternoons.

All participants commented that there was an overemphasis on icebreakers and 'getting-to-know-you' activities, which did not leave enough room for dialogue. The consensus was that this had been remedied following a mid-term programme review. Participants also commented on the themes that were given for the story exchanges, and how that sometimes these were too broad, or did not offer the opportunity for deeper and more meaningful discussion.

Inspiration and bravery were pretty vague, and you couldn't go too deep.

If you're trying to achieve the whole 'empathy' thing it's better when you go deep.

Like when we got 'a time you felt different' everyone spoke about emotions.

A lot of thought had been given to the story exchange themes prior to the project starting over, concerns around over-sharing and limits to confidentiality. The group clearly picked up on these fears, and while they understood where they had originated, they were quick to offer to take ownership and to direct the process themselves through choosing their own themes.

It makes sense what they did.

Choosing the theme would help because then we could control how deep it goes.

Like we know what our lives are like so it's easier to think of something.

Facilitators were clearly treading a delicate line here, however, as 'holding' the space is particularly challenging within a limited timeframe on a Friday afternoon, let alone in an environment such as a prison. In one of the story exchanges, the university and prison participant shared their experience of a bereavement. While on the university side of things, a de-brief with participants after every workshop was provided for, the reality of being able to provide or signpost additional support hit home following this workshop. The provision of support for emotional well-being is of course even more restricted in a prison (Hinton-Smith & Seal, 2018, p. 3).

What do you do at 5pm on a Friday?' It's very different from 5pm on a Thursday. In this instance it was fine but it's something I'd like considered for the next time.

3.6

Researcher Observations and Reflections

This project employed multiple methodologies in an attempt to capture its essence, including narrative reflections from my observations of the project in the form of a Prologue and Epilogue, a creative output in the form of an animation, and a report evaluating the qualitative data from focus groups and interviews with both participants and stakeholders. Adding to this, along with my observations from dropping in on the project periodically over its course, I took part in a story exchange as a participant, so as to be able to describe the process experientially as well as from the perspective of observer.

Yvonne Jewkes (2011) stresses the importance of researchers documenting their emotional responses to the highly charged and challenging task of conducting prison research, as even the most alien of environments become familiar over time and we can become blasé about our feelings and experience, despite those feelings being poignant and eminently sociological (p. 18). I have been researching in prisons with prisoners and outside them with former prisoners for the past six years, and the dichotomy of emotions I experience has not diminished and if anything has increased over this time. A prison participant on Canada's W2B programme asserted;

“ There is no healing from prison. You can deal with it, not heal from it. Even people who come in such as W2B students and facilitators come out scarred in ways they cannot heal from. ”

Pollack & Eldridge, 2015, p.143

Undoubtedly, some prisons are worse than others, but all of them can force you to address concepts such as liberty and human rights (Carrigan, 2015, p. 67). Research and working with prisoners can be an emotionally draining experience that can make you reflect on life and its unfairness (Carrigan, 2015, p. 67), yet conversely in my experience can also be hugely enjoyable and terrific fun. There is a quick-witted intelligence that comes with street-smarts; the intelligence connected to being able

to manoeuvre through structures such as poverty, the police, street culture, and abusive 'others' (Hatt, 2007, p.145), that can be both amusing and disarming. This intelligence and humour was remarked on by both university participants and staff.

There's a lot of slagging, 'how many students did it take to figure out where to put that chair, how many degrees?' They're so smart!

Bonding to the point where he tried on one of the girl's jackets, and it was up to here, cos you know they're so buff, they're in the gym.

A colleague, who has experience of the wrong side of the criminal justice system, often speaks of the untapped intelligence of people in prison, and the ingenuity that is required to survive and even thrive under systems of incarceration. I have also witnessed first-hand the subservient performance of prisoners, presumably to demonstrate to authorities that they are deserving of the opportunities being afforded them around access to education and other 'privileges'. This was in evidence on the Story Exchange Project, particularly and notably in the final session that was being audio recorded to be shared publicly, where several participants spoke in terms of gratitude about the educational opportunities being afforded them in prison.

Prison is one of the best things that's ever happened to me because it's opened up so many new prospects, so many new opportunities for me.

When I first arrived into jail, I didn't really have much aspirations... I'm actually taking part in a PT course as well so that will be good for my CV... and I'm happy that's the outcome of it.

This is not to say that these comments are in anyway untrue, and that participants are not being honest in their contribution, but is a discussion put forth to highlight the multiple complexities behind facilitating projects such as the Story Exchange Project, that aim to restore individual's self-worth, within a system that is brutal in its capacity to strip prisoners of all and any sense of self (Costelloe, 2014, p.32). Prisoners who

progress within the prison system in terms of their education and self-development, can also experience a backlash to what can be perceived as compliance and conformity. This backlash might take an external form such as ‘slagging’ or bullying from peer-inmates but can also be internalised. A former prisoner on the W2B programme reflects on her shame at having become what she terms a ‘correctional puppet’, a ‘successful and low-risk inmate’. And while this was not to say that prison was not in part responsible for saving her life, it was through a college education post-prison that she felt empowered to take pride in surviving poverty, violence and addiction, and to see that she was not the problem (Pollack & Eldridge, 2015, p.135).

That said, though I remain uncertain of the extent to which one can practise free will while incarcerated, I have listened in awe to prisoners articulate their transformative experience of education within the confines of a prison. Researchers have expressed amazement at how often the word ‘freedom’ appears in prisoner’s descriptions of prison school, and how this concept could be evoked within a system created to deny it (Carrigan, 2015, p.66). Personally, I have heard prisoners refer to the prison classroom as a ‘sanctuary’, an ‘escape’, and a place where ‘you can forget where you are’. The education unit in a prison occupies a precarious position within the prison system due to its reliance on the prison (Carrigan, 2015, p.66), and within this system, adult education functions to restore individual’s self-worth and as a means of resistance to the discourse that prisoner lives do not matter (Key & May, 2019). Against this precarious backdrop, the classroom provides a ‘back-stage’ where students can be themselves and resist hypermasculinity by revealing their vulnerabilities and participating in a discourse that produces them as learners instead of threats, and people instead of numbers (pp. 14-15). In complement with prison education, projects such as the Story Exchange Project have the capacity to facilitate learning from and through the words and experiences of another. The bringing together of the two groups of inside and outside students, who in normal circumstances would be unlikely to meet, is central to the process of becoming aware of and eliminating stereotypes that could prevent authentic connections (Fayter, 2016, p.59) now and into the future.

4

PART FOUR

Concluding Thoughts And Where To Next?



4

Concluding Thoughts and Where To Next?

It just goes to show that we're not that different at the end of the day. Our circumstances are different but we're not different.

The Story Exchange Project brought together two groups who expected to find great differences between themselves. Much of the power of a project like this lies in the revelation, through dialogue, of all they have in common. This deepening insight into themselves and their lived realities is a process of self-transformation. As highlighted in other similar projects in an international context, it is difficult to pinpoint how the magic happens, but it has been proposed that to a great extent it occurs through the incorporation of honest expressions of personal experiences. As participants themselves attest, they have radically transformed insights into their own selves and the reality they live within (MacLaren, 2015, p. 373).

For those of us concerned with equality, we are spurred to find ways of mitigating the issue of 'othering', or 'us' versus 'them'. One of the key barriers for young working-class men to educational progression, is a lack of confidence that university life is for them. With accents, clothing and lifestyles that may differ from their middle-class peers, it can be hard to imagine fitting in (Johnson, 2019). Senator Lynne Ruane (2018) asserts it to be the culture of Higher Education Institutions that excludes the working classes; 'It's the feeling that we'll be kept out, the feeling that we'll be thrown out, the feeling that we won't belong'. The challenge of 'othering' in relation to prisoners, is heightened through demonization by the Irish media, fuelled by the use of language such as 'animals' and 'thugs' (Lalor, et al., 2007, p. 38), as well as the disproportionate amount of coverage given to rare and extreme crime that form the bulk of media reporting (Black, 2015).

One way to diminish the 'us versus them' attitudes is to allow individuals from the inside and the outside to engage in a shared learning experience that creates a sense of community (Link, 2016, p. 52). So, while at first the undergraduate students

often assume and worry about the criminality and dangerousness of the others; and the incarcerated or released students often assume and worry about the elitism and condescension of the university students, research indicates that participants typically move from an 'us versus them' orientation to a strong sense of community and appreciation for each other (MacLaren, 2015, p. 372). I would also propose that projects such as the Story Exchange Project afford prison participants a space to develop a greater knowledge of themselves through reflection in relation to others. This has the potential to improve their personal growth, and together with self-narrative or story-telling that holds a central place in the literature on desistance (Marsh, 2011, p.50), can contribute to supporting a non-offending identity. For the university students, programmes like this, highlight the importance and benefit of extra-curricular educational experiences that enhance their professional and personal development. This, I think, is also key to the identity of being a MAP Ambassador, and affirms the importance of the role of students within our HEIs from under-represented backgrounds or who might be the first in their families or communities to go to HE; who can connect with and open up the possibility for others through a shared commonality.

There is a huge amount of personal growth for them, and they'll go off into various professions and they'll take that with them, and I think that's a really important thing in terms of addressing stigma further down the road.

Through drawing comparisons with other prison university exchange programmes like Inside Out, W2B and Learning Together, we can begin to imagine the scope for future projects that build on the success of the Story Exchange Project and the concept of mutually beneficial learning partnerships. Typically, these programmes involve bringing traditional university students and incarcerated students together in jails and prisons for semester-long learning on subjects such as Criminology, Social Studies and other socially concerned subjects. While there are variations, the model usually involves students discussing readings, learning through dialogue, collaborative inquiry, community building, circle-work, reflective forms of individual writing, and a collaboratively designed group project (MacLaren, 2015, p.373). The W2B project in Canada goes even further and is conducted in full partnership

with both inside and outside alumni, including collective members who were previously incarcerated. Everyone involved in the W2B collective, which oversees the educational program, has a voice and is able to contribute to virtually every aspect of the program (Fayter, 2016, p.60). W2B project therefore includes incarcerated students contributing academically and critically to the research on the courses that they themselves were participants. Programme participants report a sense of ‘voice’ and agency and the cultivation of a community of learners that feels personally healing and socially transformative (Pollack, 2016).

At a partnership meeting between Mountjoy Prison and Maynooth University, Assistant Governor Walsh said that he believed there was potential to see Mountjoy Prison develop into a ‘learning campus’. Described in existing literature as the ‘invisible ghosts of penality’ (Liebling, 2000), academic interest in prison officers in Ireland remains almost non-existent (Barry, 2013). Building on programmes such as the Higher Certificate in Custodial Care (HCCC), an innovative and first of its type in the world approach to teaching prison officers about rights and justice, I concur with Governor Walsh and believe there is an opportunity to extend university and prison education programmes to a ‘whole-prison approach’, that incorporates prisoners and prison officers under the umbrella of a learning campus.

In response to several university participants on the Story Exchange enthusiastically describing the novelty of visiting a prison, one of the prison participants suggested that future projects could potentially take place in the university, alluding to a desire for parity of experience.

Maybe we could go to Maynooth College for a change.

The Mountjoy Prison and Maynooth University partnership is paving the way for this type of reciprocity and a huge amount of good-will has been established. Staff from the university have been regularly hosted in Mountjoy for meetings, and this has been reciprocated by both prison staff and a prisoner having been invited to speak publicly in Maynooth. In response to the Covid 19 crisis, the Director General of the Irish Prison Service made a change to IT policy to allow inmates access to online lectures and tutorials. As we move to recover from the shock of Covid 19 and

gather ourselves and our priorities to move forward, developing and maintaining relationships and building on partnership is more challenging and requires even more outside-the-box thinking. Conversely, however, as evidenced by the actions of the Director General, the technological strides that have been made in the short time span since the pandemic lockdown, could make the traversing of these spaces more accessible and bring the university into the prison and the prison into the university in ways we could never have previously imagined.

EPILOGUE

Four young women are striding purposefully side by side down North Circular road. Babies blink in matching outfits, expertly balanced on sashaying hips. They are glamorous, in a Kardashian sense, and turn heads as they make their way towards the prison.

After depositing my phone and keys at the main gate, I meet another line of women and children at security. The atmosphere is sombre and there are no prams or buggies. Eyes lowered, I take the left entrance reserved for staff, remove my jacket and belt, and put my possessions through the scanner.

'I'm with Maynooth University and Gaisce', I explain before passing through the metal detector.

'More donuts for Donncha?' asks the guard on the other side, nodding towards my belongings in the tray.

We both know that the brown paper bag stuffed with Reece's Pieces and jellybeans is not for the Governor, but I smile and roll my eyes.

'They've gone through already have they?' I ask.

'Yeah, you're the last'.

I emerge onto the thoroughfare, where a mother and toddler in red puffer jackets appear to be lost. A guard strolls over from the large metal doors of the main jail, so I turn on my heel and head in the opposite direction through the archway, towards the progression unit. The grounds outside the education building are planted with flowers, affording some much-needed colour to all the grey concrete. I swing a right, and enter the building into what might as well be the hallway of any public office in the country. A guard buzzes me into the circle. We exchange pleasantries. Through the metal grille I spy a group of prisoners gathered on the landing. One nods in my direction as I make my way towards the Chapel.

The buzz of conversation hits me as I pull open the double doors. The group are congregated in an elevated space to the left of the split-level

room, and for a second I can't tell the inmates and university students apart. I'm greeted with warm smiles and interest at the paper bag I am carrying.

'What's in that? Please tell me it's a kebab?' asks the young man to my left to a chorus of groans and laughter.

I pour out the contents next to the box of Krispy Kremes, and some nods and smiles of appreciation travel around the circle. It's becoming easier to spot who's who.

'Sorry about the kebab', I say as I pull up a chair, 'maybe next time'.

'That's alright' he grins, returning to his conversation with the girl on the other side of him. It doesn't take long before the room is humming again with the sound of voices. I scan the circle marvelling at how relaxed everyone appears. Small groups or pairs of young people are engrossed in conversation or chatting easily, swinging precariously on the hind legs of the plastic chairs. It's a stark contrast to the first meeting, where the students hid behind each other like lambs to the slaughter. This could be any young people's group in any setting.

Niall from Gaisce round us up and onto our feet. We face into each other. 'Elephant!' shouts Niall, pointing at my neighbour, who uses his arm to fashion a trunk, while the two of us on either side use ours to form large ear-like shapes on either side. 'Palm-tree!' he shouts at someone on the other side of the circle, whose trio jump immediately to wave their hands above their heads. The games continue to much hysteria and culminate with us working in teams to compete for handfuls of jellybeans.

With everyone back in their seats, mouths full of sugar, I remind the group that I'm here to plan out the creative output for the Story Exchange project. Kebabs Guy leaves the room, returning a short while later with plastic cups of water for everyone. We set to work.

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Evaluating the Story Exchange Project

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in partnership with Gaisce - The President's Award



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