

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE STORY EXCHANGE

MOUNTJOY PRISON & MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY  
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH GAISCE - THE PRESIDENT'S AWARD

## INTRODUCTION

The Story Exchange Project was a collaboration 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 inmates from Mountjoy's Progression Unit, and university students from MAP, together for 13 workshops in the chapel in Mountjoy Prison. All participants were able to use their participation on the project towards obtaining a Gaisce; a personal development awards programme for young people between the ages of 15 and 25.

Both university and prison participants also took part in the research element, including collaborating on a creative output that took the form of an animation including collaborating on a creative output for the project that took the form of an animation. Graphic harvester Eimear McNally worked with us to animate 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<sup>1</sup> describes the process that happens when university students are brought together with individuals who are incarcerated as 'magical'. Magic is difficult to describe. The Story Exchange Animation is intended as an invitation to share in the magic.



The Story Exchange Project animation is available to watch here; <https://youtu.be/xev7PuKrdCY>

## BACKGROUND TO THE STORY EXCHANGE PROJECT

The Story Exchange Project brought together two seemingly disparate groups; university students and inmates, using the Gaisce Award framework in an attempt to promote understanding and break down barriers.

All of the university students who took part in The Story Exchange Project were part of the MAP Ambassador Programme; a volunteering initiative which promotes equity of access to the university. 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 designated as serving communities identified as disadvantaged.

Gaisce is an award that carries currency with employers, and as such was seen as a way of complementing the MAP Ambassador Programme. Over 377,000 young people have participated in the Gaisce programme; a personal development programme that acts as a catalyst in the enhancement of hope, happiness, self-efficacy, self-esteem, and psychological well-being in its participants<sup>2</sup>. While Gaisce has been operating in Irish prisons for over 15 years, this was the first pairing of inside and outside Gaisce participants and adopted a peer-to-peer approach.

**They were peers albeit on a different path**

Many young people entering custody believe they are worthless, and for many participants in prison, a Gaisce Award is the first positive recognition they have ever received<sup>3</sup>. 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

**To some extent they have closed the doors on themselves....and even the smallest chink of light can often be enough to motivate them to go on and do something else'.**

<sup>1</sup>MacLaren, K. (2015) The Magic Happens Inside Out: A Reflection on the Transformative Power of Self-Expression and Dialogical Inquiry in Inside-Out Prison Exchange Courses. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 22:4, 371-385, DOI: 10.1080/10749039.2015.1075045.

<sup>2</sup>Clarke MacMahon, N. & O'Reilly, G. (2015). 'It made you feel you had self-worth'. Does Gaisce - The President's Award act as catalyst in the enhancement of the psychological attributes of: hope, self-efficacy, self-esteem, happiness, and psychological well-being in its participants? Dublin: UCD.

<sup>3</sup>Healy, G. (2018). The Award In Custody 'A Shared Perspective' Symposium Report. Gaisce: Dublin.

Narrative 4's story exchange was the primary facilitation tool used within the project. 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, thus facilitating the literal and metaphorical stepping into another's shoes.

**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...'.**

## MOUNTJOY PRISON CAMPUS & MAYNOOTH UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIP

Prisons and universities might not 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 capacity for life-long learning. We know that education is a protective factor against reoffending, and a college qualification has been shown to have the strongest impact on reducing recidivism<sup>4</sup>.

In 2019, Grace Edge, the MU Access Office Manager, spoke to Assistant Governor Walsh about the establishment of a reciprocal educational partnership between the two institutions.

**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.**

The Public Service Innovation Fund supported a proposal to build that partnership and 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. 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.

## THE VISUAL IDENTITY



Award-winning artist and former prisoner Jimmy Leonard was approached to develop a visual identity for the partnership. 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'. Graphic designer and illustrator Susan Meaney drew on the vibrant colours and geometric style of Leonard's original oil painting, which 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 concept of ancient tangram puzzles was incorporated into options for a visual identity to represent the partnership. The partnership steering committee, that includes representation from the prisoner body and the prison education units, 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.



## EVALUATING THE STORY EXCHANGE PROJECT

The methodological approach for the evaluation of the Story Exchange Project was influenced by participatory arts research, and the researcher participated on some of the sessions and story exchanges. 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. There were two facilitated and recorded sessions with 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. 6 stakeholders also took part in the research; 2 from Maynooth University Access Programme, 2 from Gaisce, and 2 from the Progression Unit. Elements of the researcher's participation are captured intermittently and in narrative form in the Prologue and Epilogue, affording a space where the reader can be invited to vicariously share in the experience.

*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. Excerpt from Prologue: Full report*

## THE FINDINGS

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

Both groups spoke about the bond created through exchanging stories, and through the dialogue with one another. This was seen to be key in breaking down stereotypes and barriers by coming together through identification.

Yet most participants spoke of not knowing what to expect when they signed up to participate on the project. Some mentioned that the initial concept seemed over simplistic and childish, and words such as 'patronizing' and 'stupid' arose in 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<sup>5</sup>.

Participants were unanimously positive about their experience of participation. Conversations during the focus groups were hugely animated with many people speaking at once.

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

**Yeah? Wanna swap? (Everyone laughs)**

There was also plenty of joking and good-natured teasing of each other, highlighting the ease between the two groups.

**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!**

<sup>4</sup>Batiuk, M. E., Lahm, K. F., McKeever, M., Wilcox, N., & Wilcox, P. (2005). Disentangling the effects of correctional education: Are current policies misguided? An event history analysis. *Criminal Justice*, 5(1), 55-74.

<sup>5</sup>MacLaren, K. (2015) The Magic Happens Inside Out: A Reflection on the Transformative Power of Self-Expression and Dialogical Inquiry in Inside-Out Prison Exchange Courses. *Mind, Culture, and Activity*, 22:4, 371-385, DOI: 10.1080/10749039.2015.1075045.

Paolo Freire<sup>6</sup> claimed that dialogue is the essence of education as the 'practice of freedom'. 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.

**Their perspectives on things are a lot less bleak...which is strange when you think about it...**

The motivation and engagement from the part of participants inside the prison was highlighted more by the facilitators and prison management, than by the participants themselves.

**I've never seen such ownership.**

**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.'**

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.

## WHERE TO NEXT?

**Maybe we could go to Maynooth College for a change...**

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.



Projects such as the Story Exchange afford prison participants a space to develop greater knowledge of themselves through reflection in relation to others. This has the potential to improve personal growth, and together with self-narrative or story-telling that holds a central place in the literature on desistance<sup>7</sup>, 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 professional and personal development. This also reaffirms the importance of the role of students within our universities from underrepresented backgrounds or who might be the first in their families or communities to go to college; who can connect with and open up the possibility for others through a shared commonality.

At a partnership meeting between Mountjoy Prison and Maynooth University, Assistant Governor Walsh said he believed there was potential to see Mountjoy Prison develop into a 'learning campus'. Building on programmes such as the Higher Certificate in Custodial Care, a first of its type in the world approach to teaching prison officers about rights and justice, we believe there is an opportunity to extend university and prison education programmes to a 'whole-prison approach', incorporating prisoners and prison officers under the umbrella of a learning campus. Through drawing comparisons with other prison university exchange programmes, 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.

**We need to build on this success!**

**Read the full report at:**  
<https://www.maynoothuniversity.ie/access-office/>

<sup>6</sup>Freire, P. (1998). Teachers as cultural workers: letters to those who dare teach. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press.

<sup>7</sup>Marsh, B. (2011). Narrating desistance: Identity change and the 12-step script. *Irish Probation Journal*, 8, 49-68.