



School: School of Science

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Project Title: Criminal Research: Creating Communities of Practice

UOA: 33 - Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies

300-Word Statement

An increasing amount of evaluation has been conducted into the benefits of creative arts in prisons in recent years. The work considered most rigorous uses positivist methods to measure impact. This approach results in programmes being viewed as therapeutic interventions intended to 'fix' offenders rather than communities of practice where participants engage and develop through creative endeavour. The therapeutic approach dismisses the importance of the creative product and its celebration, argued to be important to the offenders' process of desistance from crime. The Criminal Research project addressed these shortfalls in social scientific research through emphasis on empowering pedagogic practices and curatorship of finished products.

The researcher devised a series of writing workshops, supported by professional authors and international creative writing colleagues. The workshops were developed for prisons and drew on key findings from desistance research showing the importance of narrative identity and relationships to a reduction in offending. The finished work was compiled in a series of anthologies and these were presented to prison participants at ceremonies convened to acknowledge their achievements. The anthologies also serve as an archive of the outcomes of a clearly documented research process.

Essential to this endeavour was the creation of learning spaces that were creatively stimulating and enabled the emergence of a literary ecology. Two programmes were developed in collaboration with a university (Colorado State University) and prison in the UK and US in order to share best practice. One programme enabled peer feedback from prisoners in a different country to inform the development of each participants' writing practice (Literary Chain Gang). The second programme provided prisoners with a series of 'Masterclasses' by professional authors and BSU tutors (MasterClass Series). Both programmes used video to deliver guidance and creative writing prompts, thereby increasing access to the materials and creating a legacy for future work.