



School: School of Sciences

Researcher: Ella Simpson

Project Title: Criminal Research: Creating Communities of Practice

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

Methods and Process

The theoretical underpinning for this project derived from two main sources. The creative pedagogy was informed and shaped by the taxonomy of Blythe and Sweet (2008), although adaptations were implemented in order to better accommodate the restrictions and possibilities offered by the prison environment. Their commitment, however, to facilitating self-sustaining writing communities served as a guiding influence to the current project. Criminologically, the research of Maruna (2001) formed a central plank of the design for the creative writing programme and its content. In particular Maruna's concept of the desistance narrative, through which offenders come to renarrativise their own lives in more positive ways, thereby creating alternative narrative identities for themselves, which they may go on to embody. This played out in two ways, firstly in relational interactions between prisoners and the researcher/facilitator, whereby all participants were treated first and foremost as writers. Secondly, in the writing materials themselves; exercises were structured in ways that encouraged the creation of alternative viewpoints or different ways of seeing the world. Both of the programmes emphasised the importance of this ability through the introduction of alternative perspectives from outside of the group (in the Literary Chain Gang via prisoners from a different country, while the Masterclass Series featured professional writers offering personal experiences of using defamiliarisation techniques in their writing and their lives).

The researcher developed an [overview](#) of the aims and intentions of each project, the logistics and syllabus. These were further negotiated with all partners in the programmes. Once agreed, more detailed workshop plans were devised for each session (see *example 1*, as appendix). In some cases, these were then recorded as video prompts (see *example 2*, included video on this item). In the case of the Masterclass Series, the researcher worked with a media team to produce professional standard 15 minute videos (see for example Nathan Filer's video, the second of the three in this Collection's 'Master Class' Videos item).

In both programmes the main interaction between researchers and prisoners took place in small workshop settings on a once weekly basis. This relates to Blythe and

Sweet's (2008) workshop approach, although in the case of the Masterclass Series this was adapted to accommodate an atelier approach through the use of Masterclass video prompts from professional authors and one to one feedback with the creative writing facilitator/researcher. A maximum of 15 and a minimum of three men participated in each session. Numbers fluctuated throughout the programmes due to the demands of prison regimes, individual participants' motivation and their release from prison. In both programmes a core group of around five men attended all sessions and these men served to create a solid base from which developed committed communities of practice. In addition to developing strong collective identities as a group of writers, these men began to promote wider engagement with creative arts within the prison. The core group would share writing exercises conducted in the workshops with men unable to attend, and the facilitator/researcher began to provide the materials in written form for self-isolating prisoners. The beginnings of a literary ecology began to emerge.

At the end of each programme the men were asked for feedback on their experience. Examples (see *example 3*, in appendix) taken from this feedback suggest that the aim of offering participants alternative narratives identities was to some extent achieved. It is the case that one of the men who participated in the Masterclass Series has since gone on to begin a degree level study in a Film and Television programme and continues to collaborate with the researcher in other creative projects.

Finally, anthologies were edited, produced and published (see this Collection's central output items) and presentation ceremonies organised with the relevant prisons. These served as, what Maruna (2001: 158) describes as a 'redemption rituals' which serve to bear witness to a person's reconfiguration of their identity. In these cases, prisoners were recognised for their achievements as writers rather than being seen purely as prisoners.

Criminal Research is an ongoing project. Future activities that build on the initial work include:

- Authoring of a journal article that responds to and extends Blythe and Sweet's taxonomy of creative writing pedagogy.
- Reiteration of both creative writing programmes in order to further develop the ambition of creating literary ecologies in custodial settings.
- Developing research frameworks that enable clearer understanding of the benefits for creative writing in prisons without resorting to conventional evaluation methods.

Appendix 1: *Example 1*

Chain Gang - Ella's Exercise Week 2

1. Fold a piece of A4 paper in half lengthways.
2. Ask participants to choose an emotion. Write it at the top of the left side of the paper.
3. Quickly write 10 concrete nouns down the right hand side of the piece of paper (the nouns must be concrete not abstract).
4. Write the emotion on the same line but on the left-hand side of the paper. It should look like this:

Surprise	Chicken
Surprise	Tree
Surprise	Net
etc	

5. Now say why each of the concrete nouns is 'like' the emotion (e.g. surprise is like a chicken because it's headless and heedless and runs around scratching in the dirt).

Surprise	(is like a)	Chicken	(because) it's headless and runs around scratching the dirt
Surprise	(is like a)	Tree	(because)
Surprise	(is like a)	Net	(because)
etc			

6. Ask participants to read the 10 lines back to themselves. They will find some powerful lines, some poetic lines. Ask them to make small changes to increase the impact, to improve how it sounds. They can reorder the lines, they can change tenses, turn similes in metaphors, whatever works. For example:

From:

Surprise is like a chicken because it's headless and runs around scratching the dirt

To:

Suprise is like a chicken, headless and scratching around in the dirt.

7. Give the work a title.
8. Read this round. There will be poetry in it, in your responses draw this out. Emphasise that these are similes, and perhaps metaphors. They are using poetic devices.

Bonus exercise (if there's time)

Appendix 1: *Example 1*

9. Write a short story or poem that makes use of all of these similes.

10. Give the story or poem a title.

11. Read round and feedback.

COURSE FEEDBACK

FIRSTLY I ALWAYS GET ON CREATIVE WRITING COURSES! ITS FAIR TO SAY I AM A REGULAR! HOWEVER I WOULD BE A LIE IF I DID NOT SAY THAT ELLAS COURSE 'IS' BY FAR THE BEST CREATIVE WRITING COURSE I HAVE EVER BEEN ON. PERIOD!

HER COURSE HAS 'FOR ME' CREATED NEW PRIMARY INTERESTS AND INTENTIONS IN THE FIELD.

I DO NOT BELIEVE ELLAS TEACHING SKILLS AND THE WAY SHE INTERACTS WITH HER STUDENTS IN THE COURSE (DELIVERY) CAN BE TOPPED BY ANYONE BUT HERSELF! WHETHER SHE IS PRAISING, ENCOURAGING, DIRECTING ALTERNATIVE IDEAS FOR SOMEONE'S WORK OR EVEN CONSTRUCTIVELY CRITICISING SOMEONE'S WORK OR WHATEVER, ITS DONE IN SUCH A PROFESSIONAL WAY THAT YOUR LEFT CONFIDENT, ENCOURAGED AND EVEN MORE DEDICATED AND INTERESTED THAN BEFORE AND CONFIDENT IN YOUR LEARNING - THESE ARE EXCELLENT STUDENT SKILLS ALONGSIDE EXCELLENT PEOPLE SKILLS! SHE'S ABSOLUTELY SECOND TO NONE.

NONE THE LESS THE COURSE IN ITSELF IS EXCELLENT AND I BELIEVE IT SHOULD BE DOLED OUT ALL AROUND THE COUNTRY - SIMPLE REASON BEING, I USED TO ONLY BE 'WILLING' TO JOIN CREATIVE WRITING COURSES BUT NOW DUE TO HER COURSE "I ACTUALLY DON'T REALLY WANT TO DO ANYTHING ELSE" AND WOULD BE HAPPY TO ATTEND ALL DAY, EVERY DAY IF IT WAS A FULL TIME COURSE.

I AM ACTUALLY A LITTLE SAD THE COURSE IS NOW OVER BUT AT THE SAME TIME ITS BEEN A PLEASURE AND I NOW HAVE A NEW AND PROMINENT INTEREST, HOBBY AND PASTIME IN MY LIFE SO ITS ALL GOOD - THANKS TO ELLA AND HER COURSE. ALSO I INTEND TO BECOME A PROFESSIONAL WRITER/AUTHOR AS A POSSIBLE CAREER. REGARDLESS OF THE RESULT I WILL STILL ENJOY IT, AT THE ^{VERY} LEAST.

7th December 20

Ella Simpson Creative Writing Class [REDACTED]

For me this writing class has been a breath of fresh air, I've enjoyed it immensely. Threw this course I have explored different writing styles through the video tuitions and my confidence has grown by sharing in each session and receiving feedback.

The time has gone so quickly which in prison is a good thing although I am saddened that the course will soon come to an end. I now realise how much I enjoy the process of writing and I am eager to complete my novel and rewrite for the big screen.

This course is excellent and Ella Simpson is a great course provider who engages and stimulates all who encounter her. I would love to attend Bath Spa University if I was to do any higher education in creative writing as Ella is such a good ambassador and her enthusiasm in the class kept me coming back.

With that I would like to say
Thank you