Collaborating across prison walls and borders: co-creating an all-island curriculum that builds empathy and mutual understanding between diverse communities of North and South of Ireland prison-university partnerships.

Gillian McNaull*, Shadd Maruna, Queen’s University Belfast
Katharina Swirak, James Cronin, Maggie O’Neill, Kathleen White, University College Cork

Academics from University College Cork and Queens University Belfast have over the past two years established university-prison education partnerships with Cork Prison and HMP Hydebank Wood. Borrowing from similar US and UK based models, the Cork ‘Inside Out’ and Belfast ‘Learning Together’ projects are the first such courses on the island of Ireland, with university students and incarcerated persons studying side-by-side as equals in the prison classroom. Students and educators report that participation in the prison-university classroom raises empathy and provides skills for entering into dialogue across social differences. The North/South HEA-funded ‘TOGETHER’ collaboration between these two projects will now research the learning from these innovative approaches to university-prison education with incarcerated and university students in and across both sites. TOGETHER will facilitate incarcerated and university students to act as researchers, who will document and analyse how their different backgrounds shape their experiences of justice, stigma, labelling and harm. Through creative, visual and participatory methods, incarcerated and university students will record moments of learning in the prison-university classroom. Importantly, this will also provide insights into how prison-university classrooms facilitate students in building empathy towards their peers from diverse backgrounds. Both Belfast and Cork classrooms will also collaborate to further improve each other’s work. As a result of this process, TOGETHER will then produce the first all-island Curriculum for prison-university partnerships. This Curriculum will be the first of its kind on the island of Ireland, adapted specifically to an all-island context, and moving beyond the imported ideas from the US and the UK.

Learning from Irish university prison education partnerships

International research suggests that prison-university partnerships in different jurisdictions (primarily the US and UK) have transformative potential for involved learners and educators (MacLennan and Gosling, 2020; Pompa, 2013). Proponents argue that the pedagogical model of learning side-by-side across social differences can ‘overcome social barriers and prejudices to embrace and celebrate diversity; support students to critically explore their own beliefs and identities; and go on to utilise this educational experience to foster social change on both sides of the prison walls’ (King et al., 2019: 66). Proponents argue that prison-university partnerships can also address several inter-related concerns, relevant not only to incarcerated students and the goals of rehabilitation and reintegration, but also to university students and the way...
we envisage education more generally (Gray et al., 2019; Trasher et al., 2020). These include the creation of learning spaces where learners from different walks of life and diverse backgrounds can encounter each other as equals (Ludlow et al., 2019; Maclaren, 2015). Through the deployment of creative and collaborative teaching praxis, learning and communication happens across often challenging social barriers (MacLennan and Gosling, 2020; Wyant and Lockwood, 2018).

In Ireland, the TOGETHER teams have set up the first prison-university partnerships based on emancipatory principles in 2019, building on programmes originating in the UK (Learning Together) and US (Inside Out). In Cork, the collaboration between the Department of Sociology and Criminology at University College Cork (UCC) and Cork Prison Education Unit, involves the delivery of a module on criminal justice and social justice. Over the course of 12 weeks, 10 UCC BA Criminology students and 10 incarcerated men enter into a dialogue and learn together across social differences through a range of diverse and creative group work activities in Cork Prison. Preliminary findings have shown that both inside and outside students have benefitted from the Programme in various ways.

In Belfast, a collaboration between the School of Social Sciences, Education & Social Work at Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) and HMP Hydebank Wood was initiated in 2019, affiliated with the ‘Learning Together’ collective of mainly England-based partnerships. Hydebank Wood is a unique facility in that it houses both women and young males (between the ages of 18 and 22, primarily). For the most part, these two populations are kept separate, including in educational provision, so the initial Learning Together course in 2019 was actually the first time a mixed gender cohort studied in the same classroom. The Learning Together course with QUB is the only opportunity for Hydebank residents to experience a face-to-face university classroom and interact with other university students. The QUB course focuses on theory and research around prisoner rehabilitation and desistance from crime, so even though the Hydebank students have had little exposure to academic criminology, they find they have a great deal to say about the subject. TOGETHER will unite these two prison-university classrooms with a view to develop an all-island approach to convivial prison-university education.

**Participatory action research as a tool of fostering symmetrical communication in the context of highly unequal power relations**

The TOGETHER project methodology is informed by participatory methodologies originating from the global south (Fals-Borda 1988; Freire, 1970; Illich, 1973), to work with students as researchers (Mena and Messiou 2020) using creative and sensory criminological methods (McNeill and Urie, 2020; Herrity, Schmidt and Warr, 2021; O’Neill et al., 2017). Participatory Action Research (PAR) is based on the principles of inclusion, participation, valuing all voices and action oriented interventions emerging from the collaborative knowledge produced and facilitates the space for marginalised voices to speak and be heard. The voices of those incarcerated are often mediated by others; or they are silenced and indeed ‘othered’. Participatory approaches to research facilitate the space for collaboration, dialogue, and action. Participatory action research produces ‘symmetrical communication’ (Fals-Borda, 1988), indeed ‘symmetrical reciprocity’ in the relational field of the research. This relates well to the models of teaching and learning in both project locations in Cork and Belfast and in turn opens a space for dialogue and interpretation that can lead to better knowledge and
understanding of action oriented interventions. Attention to rigour, validity, and an ethic of care is also central to participatory research as a social and relational good. The principles and practice of participatory action research also connects, for the TOGETHER research team, with the aims of a ‘public criminology’ and by this we mean criminological analysis that promotes public dialogue, reflection and understanding of critical criminal justice issues.

The research methods deployed in TOGETHER will facilitate the inclusion of incarcerated and university students as co-researchers by including training on participatory research methods as part of the research process. The TOGETHER research methods will include a variety of participatory and creative research methods, particularly through visual practices and also facilitate peer-feedback between both student cohorts in Cork and Belfast, creating symmetry and collective recognition of students across south and north as collaborators and co-creators of knowledge and understanding. Finally, the TOGETHER project will produce collaborative documentation, analysis and curation of a catalogue of artefacts of learning.

Conviviality in the Criminology Prison-University Classroom

Through PAR methods, TOGETHER aims to mobilise the learning of the two pioneering university-prison education partnerships on the island of Ireland, in order to develop a joint all island curriculum that can build empathy and mutual understanding between diverse communities. The TOGETHER research collaboration will transcend the heritage of US/UK models of prison-university partnerships by conducting foundational comparative research on both prison-university classrooms and by co-producing with students in and across both locations a bespoke all-island curriculum for ‘convivial learning’. Borrowing from Illich’s idea of conviviality (1973), ‘convivial learning’ emphasises participatory decision-making and collaborative explorations of justice within and beyond the third-level classroom, paying particular attention to often unheard voices. Participatory methodologies alongside a dialogical exchange between these two classrooms, will provide meaningful insights into how incarcerated and university students draw on their differentially lived experiences when entering into dialogue on themes of criminalisation and experience of criminal justice and rehabilitation.

As a transdisciplinary project, TOGETHER crosses the disciplinary boundaries of Criminology and the Science of Teaching and Learning. This approach means that the project deploys a holistic approach to developing research on the impacts of teaching and learning praxis in prison-university partnerships. The prison-university classroom where incarcerated and university students from diverse backgrounds meet, acts as an intensified social microcosm where teaching and learning tools for fostering dialogue and mutual understanding can be researched and further developed.

Ultimately, the project will co-produce the first all-island curriculum for prison-university partnerships and create a joint north south research-practice network for third-level educators, interested in authentically developing convivial classroom experiences. We will utilise the academic discipline of Criminology as a vehicle to identify how we can facilitate empathetic understanding and mutual dialogue amongst students from diverse communities on contentious issues that ultimately affect us all, while supporting consensus and capacity building on all-island approaches to emancipatory learning in third level institutions.
References


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*For more information about this work, please contact Gillian McNaull: gillian.mcnaull@qub.ac.uk*