

Students and prisoners study together in course that reveals the power of collaborative education

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Prisoner and guard. Credit: Learning Together/Ministry of Justice

A highly innovative project in which Cambridge students and prisoners studied together at a Category B prison in Buckinghamshire has broken down prejudices and created new possibilities for all of those who took part. The researchers behind it suggest that more such collaborative learning initiatives could help dismantle stereotypes and offer prisoners a meaningful vision for the future after release.

The wealth of untapped academic talent inside the [criminal justice](#) system has been illuminated by a ground-breaking project in which people in prison studied in equal partnership with Cambridge [students](#).

To date, 22 prisoners have participated in the Learning Together initiative at HMP Grendon in Buckinghamshire, which completed its second term last week. Many students have described it as a life-changing experience, and one student who is currently in prison has already had a paper accepted by an academic journal.

The project was funded by the British Academy and consists of carefully-structured, eight-week courses involving both graduates studying for the MPhil in Criminology at the University of Cambridge and students from the prison itself. All of the participants co-operate on equal terms, sharing exactly the same study materials, and working together in small group sessions.

In a report due to be published in the next edition of The Prison Service Journal, the organisers, Dr Ruth Armstrong and Dr Amy Ludlow, argue that the course has dismantled stereotypes and prejudice in both directions. While it overturns the assumptions of many prisoners that a university education is something that they will never be able to achieve, it does so by highlighting their ability to handle complex subject matter on an equal footing with their Cambridge peers.

The forthcoming report argues that more should be done to develop models of prison education which, rather than teaching prisoners in isolation, are built around active collaborations with organisations beyond their walls. In particular, it presents powerful evidence – drawn from interviews with the students who took part – that the experience of studying with others profoundly affected the ways in which all students viewed themselves and thought about the future.

One participant, Gareth, has already written a review of an academic book that he will publish alongside Ludlow and Armstrong in a peer reviewed journal next month. In his graduation speech, Gareth said: "For a large part of my sentence, who I am has been entirely synonymous with the reasons I ended up in prison. Reflecting on the initiative, it seems that the overwhelming product was that I was reminded of being someone other than the person who committed these offences.

"I am someone who has valid and useful opinions, I have an interest in how society works, and the connectedness we feel with the other people who we share this world with. I am developing a sense that not only do I want to help people – I am starting to believe I can."

The course organisers suggest that such experiences point to the capacity of projects like theirs to improve current prison-based learning and transform the learning cultures of both prisons and universities, in ways that help all students to realise and develop their skills and talents to support social progress.

They point out that a pathway out of crime relies on something called "Diachronic Self-Control" – the idea that a person can have ideas about what they want to achieve in life, but that these will remain unfulfilled unless they can also access the places and connections which make them achievable. "People have to be able to perceive a different future to be able to move towards that future," the study observes.

The Learning Together course involves weekly sessions, each lasting two and a half hours, and covers a series of topics such as the legitimacy of power, and the rebuilding of non-offending lives.

Each week's reading list typically involves an academic paper and a more accessible piece of content. For example, for the session on Trust and Democratic Voice, students were also asked to read an article about how

marginalised groups in Tunisia used hip-hop as a means of self-expression with which to confront state power during the Arab Spring.

Armstrong, who is a Research Associate in Criminology at St John's College, Cambridge, said that much of the course drew on ideas from more general research into education. In particular, it applies the principles that students learn better when they absorb new information through dialogue and shape it in light of their experiences, rather than through instruction alone. When students realise they have potential, they adopt a "growth mindset" and are more able to capitalise on it.

"When we move some of those ideas from the learning environment into criminal justice, what we show people in prison is that they are not fixed and defined by their offending, but that there are avenues for them to progress," she said. "That's a very powerful message."

Ludlow, a lecturer in Law and Criminology at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, added: "That message is just as powerful for the Cambridge students. Many of them talked to us about how, before Learning Together, their world views were small. Studying together, in dialogue, helped everyone to see how individual ideas and experiences interact with bigger institutions, histories and social forces."

Their views are echoed by extensive feedback from the students themselves, much of which is reported in the forthcoming journal article. In one particularly moving graduation speech, a student called Zaheer reflected: "It gave me self-esteem and confidence in my own abilities... Being able to put our past behind us and do something positive like this has helped our confidence, transforming our lives."

The project has received praise from the Secretary of State for Justice, Michael Gove. "We must be more demanding of our prisons, and more demanding of offenders, which means giving prisoners new

opportunities but expecting them to engage seriously and purposefully in education and work," he said. "I have seen for myself that the Learning Together Initiative at HMP Grendon provides the chance for prisoners to work towards their full potential and gain qualifications as a result. It does great work and it is a testament to the scheme and the hard work of those involved that so many are able to attend the graduation ceremony."

The Governor of HMP Grendon, Jamie Bennett, said: "The therapeutic work of Grendon helps to explore and manage some of the profound traumas and problems experienced by the men in our care. Whilst doing this, it is also important to offer opportunities in which they can discover and develop their talents. This course is an example of that."

Rod Clark, Chief Executive of the Prisoners' Education Trust, highlighted the value of Learning Together as an initiative with benefits both for the students within the prison and those at Cambridge.

"Problems within prisons – safety concerns, overcrowding, limited access to classes – can make creating a healthy learning environment incredibly difficult," he added. "Projects like Learning Together help to achieve just that, offering tremendous benefits for people on both sides of the prison wall. They allow prisoners to recognise their ambitions and motivations, while giving the student population an understanding of prison life."

Armstrong and Ludlow are supporting the creation of similar partnerships between other universities and prisons and other departments within the University of Cambridge. They are also involved with further collaborative initiatives focused on different skills, such as cooking and making music.

Their report calls for the development of an approach to prison education that is "more porous" in terms of its creative engagement with

the outside world, and its approach to [prisoners](#) as potential assets to society rather than people who merely require correction.

More information: Further information about the Learning Together Programme can be found here: www.cctl.cam.ac.uk/case-studies/learning-together-being

Provided by University of Cambridge

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