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Learning Desistance Together

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Abstract: *Drawing on self-report data from a Learning Criminology Inside initiative bringing together BA Criminology students from the University of Manchester with prison-based students from a category C resettlement prison, this article will consider the process of studying desistance “together” in this collaborative setting. It will discuss the complexities of facilitating an external University course in a category C resettlement prison and illustrate how many of the expected and observed behaviours of both sets of students and staff involved reflected themes common to research in reintegration and desistance. The experience of taking part in a prison-based university level course incurs setbacks, as does desistance, and to overcome these, subjective and structural elements similar to those identified in research around desistance from crime are required. Consequently, while discussing desistance, students (and staff) were also practicing elements of it, especially internal factors such as self-determination and persistence and structural factors in terms of support. This paper will also show the possibilities of learning desistance together for both traditional university-based and prison-based students, including, contact with people who can see the new version of “self”, a support system, and ideas for new pathways to follow.*

Keywords: *Desistance, prison education, learning together*

I think it's true that to in order to change for the better, you must first make the decision to change yourself and sort of embrace a new, more positive self. It's desistance in the making! Mufasa doesn't think anyone can change because he is yet to decide to change himself. Joe believes people can change because he believes he can change.
—Bonnie, *University-based student in weekly reflective diary*

The University of Manchester's Learning Criminology Inside (LCI) initiative began in September 2017 with 22 university-based and prison-based students studying a course titled From Imprisonment to Rehabilitation. This 3rd year optional unit on the University of Manchester's BA Criminology programme, created some years earlier but previously delivered only on campus, covers a variety of research and theory regarding prison reintegration and desistance from crime. The topic is popular among traditional university students, especially those with an interest in working in rehabilitative endeavours, but has particular meaning for the prison-based students who were often a few weeks or months away from their own release and reintegration process.

The Learning Criminology Inside course was intended to be educational for all participants, of course, but in no way was this designed as a rehabilitative project. That is, the intention was not to challenge criminogenic thinking or facilitate good lives. The project sought to allow prison-based students exposure to a university classroom environment (an experience almost none had ever had) and to allow university-based students exposure to a prison environment (an experience none had ever had). The assumption was that this



exposure would help the participants expand their understandings of the world and themselves, which we argue is a good thing in itself. At the same time, there is a growing body of theory that suggests this crossing of boundaries can create an opportunity for personal and/or collective growth and development that could be related to transformations like desistance from crime (see e.g., Armstrong & Ludlow, 2016; Behan, 2014; King, Measham & O'Brien, 2018; Szifris, Fox & Bradbury, 2018).

In this sense, there is a parallel between the subject matter discussed in the course (primarily, “desistance from crime”) and the unusual design of the classroom intervention itself. This is not to say that the intervention was a rehabilitative one, however, as desistance is not the same thing as *rehabilitation*. Indeed, from its origins, the concept of desistance was understood as denoting the opposite or at least a stark contrast to rehabilitation (as the students learned on the course). Over the past 70 or so years, “rehabilitation” has come to be understood as a top down process, something “done to” or at least “with” an individual (see Ward & Maruna, 2007). Prisons or probation officers are often said to “offer,” “deliver” or even “do” rehabilitation, as in “E Wing will be doing rehabilitative work from 3 to 5 p.m. on Wednesdays.” The same cannot be said about desistance. Although, like rehabilitation, the word “desistance” refers to the process of sustaining from criminal behaviour, the latter word was initially created to describe those people who “spontaneously” desisted without any form of formal treatment. That is, one either is rehabilitated by the system or else they desist “on their own” (although these old conceptions have long been challenged in desistance research, (see e.g., Maruna, 2001; Maruna et al., 2004). Although such a distinction is largely fictitious (no one changes “on their own”), it remains the case that professionals cannot “do” desistance to someone else, the term refers to a person’s own pathway or process, external and internal.

This paper highlights the role that shared education initiatives might potentially play in these desistance journeys, illustrated with examples from our pilot initiative. Equally, we highlight the impacts the intervention had for university-based students, many of whom said they felt they changed as much or more than the prison-based students during the course. The complexities of delivering education in a prison setting are highlighted and we demonstrate how, through negotiating the challenges of being involved in a course on desistance, students (and staff) were also practising elements that have been found to feature in the desistance process. We conclude that voluntarily taking part in shared learning opportunities such as this can help (both prison-based and university-based) students better understand desistance through an experiential process.

Desistance and Education

Research has found that participation in higher education in prison can potentially be a transformative experience for those in prison (Clark, 2016; Duguid & Pawson, 1998; Pike & Adams, 2012; Wilson & Reuss, 2000) although evidence is limited by practicalities. Czerniaski (2015) highlighted the difficulties of identifying evidence to support any relationship, a process which is further complicated by the complexities of tracking people once they have been released into the community. Thus, although evidence has increasingly indicated the potential for University-level education (and particularly programmes involving collaborative, rather than distance learning) to positively impact on desistance, higher education has not been fully considered in terms of desistance (Armstrong & Ludlow, 2016; Pompa, 2013).

The process of desistance is rarely linear or straightforward, and most people going through it experience peaks and lows (Laub & Sampson, 2001). Most theorists agree that the process of change is multifaceted and encompasses a complex interplay between structural-role changes (e.g., Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993) and subjective-agentic changes (Burnett, 1992; Farrall & Bowling, 1999; Gadd & Farrall, 2004; Giordano et al., 2002; Maruna, 2001). Taking part in prison-based education can potentially impact on all of these factors related to desistance from crime.

From a structural perspective, social control arguments contend that through education people can become more bonded to society and can access new networks of people and new routines (Laub & Sampson, 2003; Sampson & Laub, 1993). This provides opportunities for people to “knife off” their past and distance themselves from the causes of crime and criminal environments (Laub & Sampson, 2003; but see Maruna & Roy, 2007). Taking part in learning with university students offers those in prison access to more people (social capital) (see Farrall, 2002).

Education also might provide individuals with an opportunity to perceive an alternative future for themselves (Behan, 2014; King, Measham & O'Brien, 2018; Szifris, Fox & Bradbury, 2018), a key aspect in many more subjective formulations of desistance (see Paternoster & Bushway, 2009; Shapland & Bottoms, 2011). Subjective reformulation of identity and autobiography has been found to be a key aspect in the process of change (Giordano et al., 2002; King, 2012; Maruna, 2001; Rungay, 2004), although there has been debate about whether this has to be through an intentional shift in identity (Maruna, 2001; Paternoster & Bushway, 2009) or whether social processes allow this shift (Giordano et al., 2002). Education can give people a new script and identity away from their offending or prison identity. Further, if recognition from others is important for internalisation of a new identity (Gadd, 2006; Maruna, 2001) then educators and fellow students can potentially provide this. LCI and other Learning Together courses provide a unique opportunity for new identities to be formulated, and feed into the desistance process.

Research on adult education in general (focussing on basic literacy) has shown that the most benefits to the learners themselves involve increases in self-confidence and self-image, rather than the improvement in knowledge (Charnley & Jones, 1979; Warner, 2016). This holds true at the prison level too according to Forster (1990), in relation to people studying at university level in several UK prisons and Cleere (2013) researching people in education in Irish prisons, who found an emphasis on changes in personality and attitudes, confidence and self-esteem, cultural change, and being valued as students rather than "prisoners". Cleere (2013) found a link between prison education and increased levels of social capital and pro-social bonds. Hughes (2009) and Reuss (1999) found that a new sense of identity was a motivating factor for participating in education in prison and similarly Wilson (2007) found people in prison went to education to maintain their outside identity.

Stern (2014) cites extensive US research evidencing that participation in education in prison is associated with reductions in recidivism by significant amounts; this pattern appears more marked the higher the level of education. Similarly, Davis et al. (2013) conducted a meta-analysis of prison education studies in the USA and concluded that inmates who participated in education had less chance of returning to prison. Ford and Schroeder (2010) considered education and offending over the life course using longitudinal data in the USA and found that involvement in higher education was associated with less offending in adulthood and that the protective effect of higher education was stronger for individuals who were more delinquent during adolescence. More recently, Bozick et al. (2018) aggregated 37 years and 78 pieces of research in the USA and found that those who took part in education in prison were 28% less likely to recidivate. Similarly, the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) (2013a) in the UK found that reoffending rates decreased by approximately two fifths when individuals took part in distance learning courses (a wide range of academic and vocational courses were included). Czerniawski (2016) urges caution in interpreting these findings, considering the substantial issues of selection bias, and questions how certain we can be that it is conclusively education that is the key catalyst for any change as numerous other factors are certainly involved in these outcomes.

Accessing Higher Education in the UK Prison System

Unlike elsewhere in Europe, the UK approach to education in prison has meant that funding for Higher Education (HE) in prison is limited and there are numerous reasons why eligible prison-based students would be discouraged from applying (Coates, 2016; Czerniawski, 2016). People in prison over 24 years old who wish to study higher education have to self-fund or apply for an Advanced Learner Loan (similar to a Student Loan), and many in prison may be reluctant to apply for such a loan knowing that they might be transferred to another establishment and unable to complete the course, or because they do not want more debt on release (Coates, 2016). Further, funding restrictions mean that only individuals within 6 years of release qualify for such loans (Coates, 2016; Darke & Aresti, 2016). Czerniawski (2016, p. 204) argues that the OLASS guidance on such loans "disincentivise[s] prisoner aspiration and demand for higher level courses". At the time of writing, the Prisoner Education Trust (PET) can only fund access courses, rather than degree level modules and Coates (2016) called for a change in this policy in her review. Further Darke and Aresti (2016) expressed concern over the lack of advice, information and assistance with applications for HE provided by prisons. Recent changes to funding in prisons have resulted in Governors having increased discretion over their budg-

ets for education which has the potential for positive impact such as increased variety of education providers and content (Beard, 2017).

The European approach to education in prison is holistic and rights based, holding that the role of education in prison is to develop the whole person, and that people in prison should have access to a wide curriculum (Council of Europe, 1990). In the UK this rhetoric has not become a reality for a number of reasons. Firstly, the conflicting priorities of the purpose of prison means that security is often prioritised over education (Czerniawski, 2016). Further, in UK prisons, the person in prison is often symbolically and practically framed as an “offender” first (for example, in *Reducing Re-offending Through Skills and Employment* (HM Government, 2005) and as a student or citizen only secondarily (Costelloe & Warner, 2014). This prioritisation results in a focus on education for the purpose of addressing offending behaviour rather than learning per se (Costelloe & Warner, 2014). Through the Transforming Rehabilitation¹ agenda (MOJ, 2013b), education and rehabilitation have become more central to reducing reoffending due to the importance placed on the relationship between education and employment (Czerniawski, 2016). Costello and Warner (2014, p. 177) argued that much employment-focused “education” views education as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. This is not in line with the way that learning is conceptualised in the field of adult education or indeed prison education as understood by the Council of Europe. The importance of focusing on education, regardless of its link to employment can be linked to desistance theory which has informed strength-based approaches to rehabilitation, such as the good lives model², which favour individuality and building on people’s strengths (Ward, Mann & Gannon, 2006; Ward & Maruna, 2007).

Models of rehabilitation influenced by desistance theory, such as these have been slow to be embraced in England and Wales. Rather, a more “authoritarian” approach to rehabilitation has remained (Behan, 2014), which seeks to mould the offender into a pre-determined pattern of thought to ensure conformity (Rotman, 1990) and focuses on managing and removing problems and problematic behaviour. While academics and some policymakers have called for holistic approaches in both education and rehabilitation, a holistic model has yet to be adopted in either (Behan, 2014; Costelloe & Warner, 2014). Behan (2014) argues that adult education in prison should involve critical thinking and that anthropocentric models of rehabilitation are also about self-discovery. The approach to rehabilitation should be about desistance but it is not. The approach to education should be about learning for learning’s sake but it is not. The development of prison-university partnerships has sought to address these incongruities, and also to provide opportunities for higher education that are not dependent on independent study, and involving the opportunity for additional positive effects such as widening support networks and co-production of knowledge (Armstrong & Ludlow, 2016).

There have been a growing number of courses across the UK since 2014 offering students from inside prison and from universities the opportunity to learn together in prison. The first such course was the Inside-Out programme run by the University of Durham, which is based on a model from the United States and has been running since 1997 (for example, see King et al., 2018). The University of Cambridge established Learning Together in 2015 with HMP Grendon. Both the Inside-Out and Learning Together models of prison-based learning see university-based and prison-based students as equals (Armstrong & Ludlow, 2016; Darke & Aresti, 2016; Pompa, 2013) where “everyone involved is seen as having something vital to offer in the learning process” (Pompa, 2013, p. 129). There are now over 30 prison-university partnerships in the UK (PET, 2018). The subjective evidence presented in this paper is based on the first such project at the University of Manchester.

Learning Criminology Inside

The Learning Criminology Inside pilot study involved 22 students (10 university-based students from University of Manchester and 12 prison-based students) studying the course unit “From Imprisonment to Rehabilitation” together over 12 weeks, beginning in September 2017 in a category C male resettlement prison in the North West of England. A risk assessment was carried out and approved by both the Prison and University, a Memorandum of Understanding developed and signed by both parties and University and ethical approval was sought and granted for both the teaching and research aspects of the project. National Research Council approvals were also granted.

The pilot began with an introductory session where students got to know each other and ground rules were mutually agreed. For the following 10 weeks, university-based students attended lectures and prison-based students listened to a podcast of that lecture and once a week the two sets of students had a seminar together in the prison for approximately 90 minutes. Here they debated and discussed topics led by different university staff (the authors) and guest speakers from a range of organisations, including criminal justice, Non-Governmental Organisations and academics from the University of Manchester and other institutions (such guest speakers also feature in the University-based lectures on the unit). University-based students and staff travelled to the prison together every week in a mini-bus which provided opportunities for both discussing pre-session issues, debrief and potentially increased participation given the distance to the prison. In the final week, there was an end-of-course celebration where all students received a certificate for taking part in, and contributing to, the course. This celebration event also featured a guest speaker from an organisation specialising in peer mentoring for people exiting the criminal justice system³ and music written and performed by one of the prison-based students. Student learning was assessed with an examination in January 2018 and a required coursework assignment of 3500 words. For the coursework assignment students had to choose a group of people being supervised in the criminal justice system and critically analyse the evidence for and processes by which this group are managed in prison and/or the community.⁴ Those who passed the course received a further certificate for successful completion of the module. A reference was provided to all prison-based students which outlined their participation and achievement in the course.

Methodology

This analysis is based on data collected during the pilot of the LCI course. With funding from the University of Manchester's Centre for Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Learning (CHERIL), this research sought to explore the change mechanisms and intermediate impacts associated with this prison-university partnership for prison-based students, university-based students, university staff and prison staff. The research also aimed to increase understanding of the processes in the prison-based learning sessions that facilitate positive impacts on university and prison-based students. The research design was mixed-methods and participant-orientated, aimed at understanding the subjective perspectives and reactions of student and staff participants as the project progressed. As all of the authors were involved at some level in the teaching or delivery of the module, this is a self-evaluation study with all of the biases inherent in such work. The goal was to better understand and improve the process and delivery of the module. In the spirit of "Learning Together", we are seeking to learn from our experiences with the initial pilot session in a systematic fashion.

All students taking part in the prison-based learning were asked to complete a survey before, and on completion of the course. The survey had been designed previously by academics (Ruth Armstrong and Amy Ludlow) at the University of Cambridge and had been adapted from scales measuring characteristics associated with good learning outcomes and reflective of aspects that research suggests are important to desistance from crime. There were four focus groups with university-based and prison-based students taking part in groups separately (one before the course started and one at the end of the course). The university-based students and prison-based students were interviewed in separate groups to allow frank conversations about any issues they might have of learning with the other set of students. This enabled evaluation of the whole course and the opportunity to identify change in these attitudes. *Reflective diaries* were completed by university and prison-based students each week. These diaries helped to determine what the impacts of taking part in the course were on the students and ensured an evaluation of the course at the micro week by week level. The students were asked to think about what parts of the sessions they had enjoyed, and any elements that had challenged them, upset them, or surprised them. The reflective diaries were not part of the assessment as is the case on some Learning Together and Inside-Out courses. University staff also completed a *reflective diary* on the weeks that they taught on the course in the prison. These captured some of the impacts on university and prison-based students and staff but also on themselves as representatives of the University. Short semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of prison staff, with a range of grades and responsibilities, at the end of the course. The aim of these was to see how the course benefitted the prison and how it could have been improved from the prison perspective.

The Research Associate on the project attended every session as a "Participant as Observer" (Fetterman,

1998; Gold, 1958). Notes were taken during the sessions and typed up as ethnographic notes. These included notes of people's comments throughout the sessions both directly to the observer or in other conversations, and observations of behaviour, body language, levels of input, and who was talking to who. This led to detailed description and rich data creating a high level of insight into the learning in practice. Participant observation has been criticised for being overly subjective because of the impact of the researcher's beliefs; it may be only what the observer thinks is important that is recorded (Johnson & Sackett, 1998). Secondly, participant observation may cause observer bias with the presence of the researcher influencing actions (Spano, 2005). Issues of subjectivity and observer bias were recognised in the analysis although every attempt was made to be as systematic and transparent as possible in the recording of data (Johnson & Sackett, 1998). Further reflectivity in the observer's ethnographic notes was important as this helps to understand any biases/influences (Cosgrove & Francis, 2011; Davies & Francis, 2011). Observer bias can also be reduced by rapport between the observer and the observed as negative effects are not determined (Spano, 2005). A mixed methods approach also helped address these issues as it enabled triangulation of the data (for example comparing ethnographic notes with the reflective diaries from that session) (Greene, Caracelli & Graham, 1989).

To ensure all student participants fully understood what they were being asked to do and that consent was informed, presentations about the research were given providing information verbally (as well as written information) about the purpose of the research element of this initiative (Noaks & Wincup, 2004). In terms of voluntariness, it was made very clear that participation in the research was not required for those taking part in the course. To emphasise this the students were asked about research participation at a separate time to the course recruitment and were given the option to withdraw from the research element at any point. All prison and university-based students consented to taking part in the research.

All participants were promised qualified confidentiality, in that we would not tell anyone directly what they had told us but that there were certain things that we would report back to the prison for purposes of avoidance of harm and for the security of the prison (Martin, 2000). As an ice-breaker in the first LCI session at the prison, students worked in groups to choose their own pseudonym to be used in publications (including throughout this paper) and presentations associated with the research, and fed back their assumed name and the reason for their choice.⁵

The large amount of detailed qualitative data was analysed thematically following Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytic process was facilitated by computer-aided data analysis software (NVIVO version 12). The thematic analysis used both a deductive and inductive approach. Before starting the analysis, the research team had identified the aim of considering the data in relation to desistance and therefore desistance themes were pre-determined and sub-themes were developed within these from the data, thus reflecting a top down, or deductive approach (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). At the same time, a bottom-up, inductive approach was also taken, whereby themes emerge from the data without pre-conceived ideas (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Data was free-coded into quite narrow categories, and then combined with others to create larger themes (e.g. Confidence, Enhancement of Learning) and sub-themes within them. The quantitative data from the pre and post-surveys was analysed using SPSS. These were limited on the basis of the small numbers although it is hoped that in continuing delivery of the programme, these data can be aggregated and analysed with future data to draw findings with increased statistical power.

While there were many important findings from the research, this paper will concentrate on the desistance related findings.

Findings

The findings from the research are structured below around desistance-related themes. Importantly, the focus of this research is not the experience of desistance (but rather of the experience of studying desistance). We have no long-term outcome evidence that any of the participants in this research (prison-based or university-based are desisting from crime). As such, this choice of thematic framing is intended to highlight the parallels in the two processes. That is, our analysis incorporates evidence from the research element of the course and explores how these findings link with the desistance literature being studied on the course. Firstly, the social factors (such as relationships and support) will be considered and then the paper will move on to co-

consider subjective, agentic factors linked to desistance (hope, self-efficacy and identity). The discussion also documents some of the challenges encountered in establishing and running the LCI programme. This impacted on students and staff in various ways and enabled the identification of strategies used to overcome these challenges, ultimately leading to links to the desistance process in terms of overcoming obstacles using different means, for example, support networks. We also provide self-report evidence of the positive impacts that taking part in the course had on students.

Respect: Relationships, Support and Social-Bonding

In their feedback, both university-based and prison-based students focused on the importance of feeling respected in their interactions with other students on the course.

They [prison-based students] said they really appreciated that we weren't defining them by that one thing they did that got them in there, so I think it was good not to ask them what they did [to end up in prison]. Even though some of us found out eventually, that wasn't the big, massive thing. That wasn't the main thing we wanted to find out. We wanted to find out what they wanted to do afterwards, where they are going after this and how they are going to motivate themselves. (Meg, a student from University Post Course Focus Group)

One of the main impacts of taking part in this course for the prison-based students was being treated as an ordinary student on the course. One prison-based student said it was "good to have normal conversations with normal people using normal language and not prison language" (Ethnographic notes). Another said, "Thank you for not looking at us like criminals on TV" (Ethnographic notes):

What I enjoyed the most was interacting with the university students—it made a nice change from speaking to criminals that moan all the time. It gave me a bit of normality and kept me sane.... I suppose the social aspect of it, I know we said we have met new people, but being in an environment that feels a little bit more normal than just daily prison life, that was nice to be able to do twice a week. (Geoff, a Prison-based student)

The main thing is the sense of normality. They are spending time with a circle of people whom they would never normally mix and you are bringing a different age of person into custody who give skills and life experiences to the learners. Normality that is bespoke focuses and engages people to be their self and find themselves in a prison system that is very controlled. (Prison staff interview)

As Armstrong and Ludlow (2016, p. 226) have argued, "if people within and without of prison know one another individually, attitudes towards ex-prisoners in general may soften", and so these interactional relationships may have a wider impact as university-based students talk to others about their positive experiences. The result may be more people seeing people who have been to prison as human beings:

This experience was unique because we were all students. The status between us was equal ... the authority was not present, and this was really important and why I think we all got on well. As students, we learned together and got to know one another as friends" (Bonnie, a University-based student)

Delivering this programme in a resettlement prison made this ability to practice normality even more timely for the prison-based students. The prison-based students were generally nearing the end of their sentences or time in closed prison conditions and were therefore soon due to have conversations and interactions with the general public. Many of the prison-based students spoke about how different conversations are on the wing to normality as "even though the jail is full of adults it doesn't mean you can have an adult conversation you know what I mean" (Mufasa, a student from Prison Post-Course Focus Group) and so it is important to have time out of the prison mindset.

Some of the prison-based students spoke about negative peer groups that had been instrumental in their offending. The university-based students recognised a realisation that to successfully desist the prison-based

students would need new peer groups. The prison-based students need separation from negative influences and courses such as LCI help prison-based students to realise that they can develop relationships with other types of people such as students and people not involved in criminal activity:

Meg: obviously they are only hanging around with other prisoners in the prison, that is the only group they can associate with but if we show them that they can associate with us and we welcome them just as much as anyone else to bring a positive change into their life then that is a really important thing. (University Post Course Focus Group)

Research on desistance frequently focuses on the role of agency and subjective change (see below), but social and personal contexts are also crucial to understanding desistance (Farrall, 2002; Farrall & Calverly, 2006) and this includes a person's peer group (Warr, 2002; Weaver, 2016). The ability to expand social networks beyond those with whom people have historically had frequent contact with assists with the availability to increased avenues of support as well as allowing the individual to see themselves in a broader variety of ways. According to desistance theory, this then could conceivably feed into the process of redefining their identity through expansion and diversification of social networks in the future.

During the course there were many examples of support within the relatively constricted confines of the LCI project. These include prison staff supporting university staff, prison staff supporting prison-based students, prison-based students supporting each other, and prison-based students and university-based students supporting and helping each other.

I remember him [prison-based student] just one week was the transition from youth to adult and he just clicked with that because he had done both so he knew and I was talking to him about it and he was like "I don't know what I am going to say to the group" and I was like "you have just said so much" and he was like "can I say that?" and I was like "yes" and that is what they want you to say and he was like "oh it is that easy" and I was like "yeah you say what you think". (Clyde, a student from University Post-Course Focus Group)

During the course, the prison-based students experienced many problems, external to LCI. There was one week in particular when the prison-based students turned up to take their exam and all but one of the men were feeling very upset and preoccupied about other things going on in their lives. While unable to offer any solutions, the RA offered support by listening to these issues and being empathetic. Their fellow prison-based students also offered support and advice. One prison-based student commented that one of the impacts of the course had been making friendships within the jail (among other prison-based students) and therein providing an additional source of informal support.

Overall, the support that was seen during LCI was both formal and informal. Whereas traditional providers of formal support involve professionals, especially around rehabilitation, treatment and reintegration, informal support (from friends, family, and acquaintances) is seen as being equally important in the desistance literature (Farrall, 2002). It is clear that other students on the LCI course fall under the "informal" support heading, whereas prison staff fall under "formal" support label. It was less clear where university staff fell in the LCI pilot, as we were perceived as authority figures, with responsibility for course organisation, but were also understood to be operating outside of the prison institution. This blurring of formal and informal networks potentially increased the networks of support perceived as available to prison-based students and allowed them to consider the nature of their own identity within those networks.

Confidence and Self-Efficacy

A further impact of taking part in LCI was the realisation by students, particularly prison-based students, that they were capable of achievement and tenacity, proving that they were able to complete an education programme. There was a growth of confidence in their own abilities throughout the course. This, as with desistance in general, was not always a linear process and some students had peaks and troughs in confidence during the course.

After being worried about being forced to speak, Neil (prison-based student) spoke towards the end of today's session. On the way out he seemed really pleased at himself for speaking saying "I contributed today, it was wrong but I did say something" (Ethnographic notes)

We finished the course by completing an assessment with multiple choice and short answer questions and I can honestly say that I will miss the Learning Criminology Inside course and all of the people that I met while doing it. I am yet to find out my mark for my essay and assessment and whether or not I have passed, but either way, completing the course has given me a sense of achievement and the realisation that I can work outside of my comfort zone, and for that I will forever be grateful ... It showed me that I can see things through to the end, erm even when, like I said, times get hard I suppose, it showed me that I suppose if I do try I can do something, complete it. (Joe, a Prison-based student)

“I felt it sort of allowed some people to realise that they can do certain things that they just didn’t think that they could.” (Clyde, a University-based student)

The prison-based students did achieve. Only six students completed the course (the resettlement status of the prison affected attrition more than the research team were able to anticipate) and four of these completed the coursework but all passed and performed as well as the university-based students. One student was re-categorised and moved to a cat D prison halfway through the course. He asked whether he could continue with it and this was enabled by working with the education department at the new prison. He completed both assessments. These achievements were recognised by the university staff and students. Armstrong and Ludlow (2016, p. 225) state how “educational research shows how peoples’ mindsets influence their capacity to learn and change. Mindsets are, in turn, influenced by surroundings. Where potential is recognised to be malleable and there are opportunities for growth, people are more likely to be able to change in the desired direction”. By definition, completing a university level course potentially enabled the students to alter their own perception of their capacity to learn and to change. Capability to change in one aspect of their lives facilitated the opportunity to achieve elsewhere. As Shapland and Bottoms (2011) found, people have to be able to perceive a new future to be able to move towards it. A number of prison-based students began re-imagining their futures and began aspiring to further and higher education on release.

Code 22 (Prison-based student) told me that he is really interested in studying for a music degree when he leaves prison. He said that this has been driven by taking part in our course. When he started Learning Criminology Inside he enjoyed it and decided he wanted to do a degree and decided that if he could cope with our course he would study music on release. (Ethnographic notes)

Yeah, I reckon I would smash a university course to be fair, I think I might try and do one when I get out and I probably wouldn’t have thought about doing one before I done this so it was good for me. (Mufasa, a student from Prison Post-course Focus Group)

Although these are purely aspirations and do not necessarily reflect actual outcomes, desistance research has found that individuals who were able to desist from crime had high levels of self-efficacy, meaning that they saw themselves in control of their futures and had a clear sense of purpose and meaning in their lives (Maruna, 2001). This possible future in education was not forced upon anyone and this agency is important, given the findings among desistance writers that self-motivation should be respected (McNeil et al., 2012).

As well as changes to how students saw themselves there were also changes in attitudes to the other group of students. University-based students desisted from seeing people in prison as stereotypes and taking part in LCI challenged what may have initially constituted an ‘us and them’ binary for some of the university students. As well as altering university-based students’ perceptions of prison-based students, this shift may also have facilitated a greater understanding of pathways into offending as something that can impact on anyone, given a specific context:

Taking part in this course broke the stereotypes I had of prisoners. I thought all of them would be threatening, physical and not interested in taking part. In fact, they were completely the opposite of all of those things. I realised that prisoners are exactly the same as us, the students, except they have made some bad decisions in their life. Some of them were the type of people I would be friends with day to day which surprised me (Matthew, a University-based student in Post Course Survey)

When reading from textbooks the idea of prisoners and offenders used to be so abstract (and like a cartoon image) but now I have an idea of how what I am reading really applies to people I've met as they are the people that spring to mind and bring it to life. (Meg, a University-based student in weekly reflective diary)

Identity

Many of the findings discussed so far, particularly regarding interactions with others, illustrate how support and self-efficacy can be strongly linked to how a person sees themselves and their identity. They can impact upon identity directly and indirectly both of which have significant implications for desistance.

The process of being treated as a human being and as a fellow student has crucial links to social bonding and helped to create the supportive networks discussed above. This process is also linked to an essential element of desistance theory—"identity". Taking part in Learning Together courses like LCI enables prison-based students some time away from their prison identities and provided reminders to them of alternative identities such as being a student or just a member of the public. There was a notion of finding oneself in education, especially for those who had been students before prison.

"Shadow said the session had relaxed him but that he was used to talking with students as he had been to college" (Ethnographic notes)

University-based students also reflected on their own future identities, and taking part in the course made them eager to work with people who had been in prison in the future mainly in the capacity as probation officers.

"Enhancement of Learning" emerged as a major theme in the data, and in relation to desistance, the prison-based students valued learning about the processes they were thinking about or actively going through. This seemed to help them reflect on themselves and their own desistance; they had thought it would be easy to leave the "offender" identity behind once they left prison but the content of the course helped them to understand that the process is much more complex, will require support and may not be linear.

Joe: "I kind of felt that I would have desisted from crime from near enough the moment that I got arrested but it has shown me that it is not going to be easy, it has taught me a lot of stuff how the theory works in terms of desistance so it has just given me a clearer understanding I suppose of what it will take to live a crime free life."

Emily: "So, you have a more realistic view now?"

Joe: "Basically yeah, I think that is a good way to put it... I just thought to myself that I have got good enough reasons to do it [desist], but it has shown me that although I have got good enough reasons to do it and I have the support networks that it is still not going to be as simple as that, it is not going to just be a straight path to desistance but I think because I have a good understanding of that I think I will be more prepared for the journey ahead" (Prison Post Course Focus Group)

Mufasa: "Yeah, you are just trapped aren't you, when I leave jail everyone I know either wants drugs or can sell you drugs so you are just trapped aren't you and you just need to be trapped between different kinds of people rather than those kinds of people ... hard though" (Prison Post Course Focus Group)

These kind of cognitive changes have been found to be very important in the process of desistance (Giordano et al., 2002), in particular in the development of new life "scripts" for engaging with the world (Rumgay, 2004). This can be applied to the 'student' identity and other non-offending identities assumed by the prison-based students during this intervention.

In both the pre- and post-course surveys the students answered the same set of statements about their personality responding to a question asking to what extent each statement was like them on a Likert type scale (e.g., I show enthusiasm). Across all 24 measures the post course results showed fewer people thinking the statements were like them. This was especially noticeable for "I get to work right away rather than procrastinating"; "I pay attention and am good at resisting distractions"; "I am always well prepared" and "I invigorate

others” with people falling from the “very much like me” category to the “somewhat like me” and “unlike me” categories. While there are many potential explanations for this, it can be argued that that taking part in the course gave all the students a more realistic view of themselves in a similar way to the prison-based students understanding of desistance described above. It made them think about their character and gave them insight into this, especially in areas that they might not have known much about before and so they were testing things that they had not previously tested for example, being prepared and procrastination. The university-based students had also been placed in an environment which they had never encountered before and, despite their achievements and academic ability, the uncertainty and challenges encountered throughout the programme may have revealed to them their relative inexperience in many areas of life whilst at the same time firming decisions for many of the students of their wish to work with people that have been through criminal justice processes in some way in the future.

Overcoming Obstacles

There were many challenges in running LCI sessions. These were mainly prison related. Working in prisons always has its challenges, but the last few years have been particularly trying in British prisons.⁶ This project started at a time of critical staff shortages in the prison which necessitated a curtailed regime where only certain wings were unlocked at any one time on a rotating basis, meaning that some of the prison-based students were locked down throughout the morning or afternoon session. This project included prison-based students from a variety of wings and those who were not on wings being unlocked at the times of the two weekly sessions struggled to attend, particularly in the first few weeks. These men reported that the prison staff were not aware of the project and so unwilling to unlock them.

In these earlier sessions it required persistence from the prison-based students to get unlocked and from the university staff to ensure those who had not arrived had the chance to attend.

On the third time I went to see [member of education staff] she was there and she was about to phone E wing when there was a knock on the door. It was Neil – he was very annoyed and frustrated that he has to fight to get unlocked and has to be brought over separately “like a child”. At least he caught me in the act of trying to get him over which we explained to him.
(Ethnographic notes)

There were some examples of prison-based students being proactive to make sure that they and other students from their wing were unlocked to attend.

Mufasa: “The loudest people get heard innit so at half 1 when they were letting him [Joe] out I would be at the door me shouting out of the door and then they would come and open me.”

Rose: “But obviously not everyone is going to be like that.”

Mufasa: “I’d come down off the landing and I’d tell them to open them two [Geoff and Jeremy] up and then the amount of times I would come and they’ve just not bothered opening up them two” (Prison Post Course Focus Group)

There were also full prison lock downs and unanticipated wing lock downs which severely affected the running of the course. This, and delayed starts to sessions due to chasing students, meant that those delivering the sessions had to be flexible and change the content of sessions to ensure that all topics were covered, and to ensure that the learning could happen in the time available. This was especially important for university-based students who were in their final year of their degree. As mentioned above, flexibility and adapting to changes are important skills to have when adopting to new identities (Rumgay, 2004).

A further prison-based issue was the conflicting priorities of those with trusted jobs in the prison such as working in the staff canteen towards their barista qualification, or working in the visits hall. These jobs were important to the prison-based students but so was the course. Therefore, they had to balance relationships with their work supervisors, education staff and commitment to the LCI course. Although burdensome, this juggling of priorities around education and work reflected a very common real-world scenario (indeed, at least one university student also had a catering job and related to the prisoners having to balance this work commitment with their studies).

Some of the academic content of the course materials and the social science terminology represented a challenge for some students, especially the jargon word “desistance”, which was unfamiliar to both university-based and prison-based students. However, no student allowed this to be a barrier to their learning, persisting with reading and discussions with other students to develop their understanding:

I am happy I have seen it through because a lot of times I wanted to give up on it basically as I was finding it difficult, I still do to be honest, but I was glad I was able to have the persistence to just keep coming back and trying basically. (A student from Prison Post-Course Focus Group)

The dual responsibility of university staff for issues of security and course facilitation also represented a challenge. These role conflicts can be explained with reference to the incongruity of learning in a prison environment (Crewe, Bennett & Smith, 2014) and the difficulties for university staff that were teaching but also in a position of responsibility for maintaining the agreements set out between the prison and university. An agreement was made with the prison that a member of the teaching team would be trained in key and radio work so that the group members would not need to be constantly escorted or supervised in the weekly sessions. University staff were responsible for getting the university-students to the teaching room and for ensuring the gates were opened at the appropriate times to receive and discharge men to and from the teaching room during “prison movements”.⁷ This relative freedom of movement in the prison provided numerous benefits. Only one prison-student commented on the dual role of the university staff, as people in prison are used to seeing civilians carrying keys, especially education staff. The member of university staff did however report feeling uncomfortable with the responsibilities around prison movements, especially when having to count the prison-students out of the teaching room as this does not fit easily with the notions of treating the two sets of students as equals. While experienced with keys, the university staff member trained on the radio was not initially at ease with this aspect. The member of staff sought help and support from prison staff in this regard and this seeking of support was witnessed by all of the students on the module. The transparency in this allowed them to understand the necessity of university staff carrying keys and a radio without which they would have been more dependent on prison staff and may not have been able to run the course due to resource issues.

In attending and participating in this course, the students (and staff) had to demonstrate persistence, resilience, and self-determination (Turner, 2017). They had to be persistent to make sure they attended. They had to be resilient if they missed a session due to prison-related issues and they had to begin to believe in their own ability to do well in the course. Similarly, the university staff (and to some extent the prison staff enabling the course) had to be persistent and resilient against all the barriers to continue to enable the course to happen. As one prison-based student said to a member of the university staff, “I’ll give you something, you never give up”. Self-determination has been linked to support and personal contexts (Turner, 2017). It is easier to be persistent and resilient when you have people supporting you, which the students who took part in LCI had more of for the duration of the course. Watching the university and prison staff performing skills needed for desistance (persistence, flexibility and resilience) is also important for the university and prison students as a form of pro-social modelling (Kirkwood, 2016). Research on probation work has acknowledged the importance of pro-social modelling in people under supervisions achieving positive outcomes, while acknowledging it cannot address all the issues some people will face (Trotter, 2009).

Conclusion

The LCI initiative and the concurrent research element gathered a considerable amount of subjective evidence from all participants—including university-based students and indeed staff participants as well—before, during and after the completion of the pilot course. These data were not intended to represent any sort of formal outcome evaluation, and indeed no information is available nor is there plans to collect data regarding the actual long-term outcomes (desisting or otherwise) of course participants. So, this was not a study of desistance nor recidivism reduction. Nonetheless, in the extensive feedback, we found clear evidence suggesting benefits of taking part in the course for prison-based students, but also very much for university-based students and participating staff (including the authors). Interestingly, considering the subject matter of this intervention, these benefits seemed to align nicely with the various theories associated with desistance research.

Meeting people in prison helps university-based students ‘desist’ from stereotypical views they had of

what an offender is and helped them understand the theory more by learning from people going through the process. This is important as many of these students explicitly said they anticipated future careers working with people in prison and on probation.

Learning criminology together appears to offer prison-based students the possibility of a new identity (even if only restricted to the confines of this intervention), contact with people who can see a new version of “self”, elements of a support system and ideas for new life pathways. The course allowed prison-based students a space to develop non-criminogenic identities, time away from being merely a “prisoner” and to feel like a “student”.

Importantly, such benefits were measured only in the very short-term (upon completion of the pilot course), and the course represented only a small part of their incarceration experience (two half-days per week for a semester). Thus, any potential benefits of such an intervention need to be understood in that far more powerful and influential institutional context in which they took place. Not only were the prison-based students studying inside a “total institution”, but they were doing so at a particularly difficult time in the history of the prison service of England and Wales. As enthusiastic as all of the learners were regarding desistance as a theory, the actual practice is going to be enormously difficult and we are not so naïve to think that this will be the long-term outcome for all or even most of the participants.

Nonetheless, the numerous inherent challenges of taking part in a prison-based university course—even just physically getting to sessions and dealing with difficulties over course content—provided some addition, important opportunities for growth and the development of resilience. The experience of taking part in such a course incurs setbacks, as does the pathway to desistance (Laub & Sampson, 2001). To overcome these setbacks (in both the course and the process of desistance) subjective and structural elements fundamental to the desistance from crime are required. Consequently, while discussing desistance as a subject, students (and staff) were also practising elements of it, including both internal factors such as self-determination and structural factors such as social bonding and support.

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Footnotes

¹ Transforming Rehabilitation was the overhaul of post-sentence provision in the UK, including the privatisation of many services such as interventions and the day to day management of those people assessed as low and medium risk (see Burke and Collett, 2016).

² See Ward, Mann and Gannon (2006) for a full discussion of the Good Lives Model

³ See <http://www.communityled.org.uk/> for further information

⁴ The prison-based students were given the option to write fewer words and those who wanted/ had to handwrite their essay were given a limit of a number of sides of A4.

⁵ Students chose their own pseudonyms for this research.

⁶ “Benchmarking” was introduced from 2013 and this sought to reduce the cost of public sector prisons and establish a rehabilitative culture (Farooq, 2014). One major result of this has been a reduction in the number of full-time prison staff (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2015).

⁷ Prison movements are allocated times in the prison regime when people in the prison are allowed to move freely from their wings to their place of activity or vice versa.

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