



Developing a *creative pedagogy* to understand the university experience of non-traditional students

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Abstract

Despite the presence of a widening participation agenda, people with criminal convictions face a number of barriers accessing and participating in higher education (Office for Students, 2019). This may be due to unspent criminal convictions (Unlock, 2018), limited confidence and self-esteem (Champion and Noble, 2016), a lack of previous educational attainment (Prison Reform Trust, 2017) and/or presence of risk-adverse, bureaucratic, university admission processes (Bhattacharya et al., 2013). As a result, people with criminal convictions are not only under-represented throughout the sector (Unlock, 2018) but completely overlooked when it comes to understanding their university experience. To address this longstanding issue, the authors have developed an educational opportunity (utilising the *Learning Together* programme) for criminal justice academics, students, practitioners and service users to come together and learn from one another through lived experience, professional practice and Creative Pedagogy. *Learning Together* was originally developed and implemented by Dr Amy Ludlow and Dr Ruth Armstrong at the University of Cambridge to provide opportunities for university students to learn alongside people serving a custodial sentence (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016).

Keywords: Higher Education; Creative Pedagogy; Criminal Convictions; Creative Writing; Learning Together

1. Introduction

Despite the presence of a widening participation agenda, people with criminal convictions face a number of barriers to accessing and participating in higher education (Office for Students, 2019). This may be due to unspent criminal convictions (Unlock, 2018), limited confidence and self-esteem (Champion and Noble, 2016), a lack of previous educational attainment (Prison

Reform Trust, 2017) and the presence of risk-adverse, bureaucratic, university admission processes (Bhattacharya et al., 2013). As a result, people with criminal convictions are not only under-represented throughout the sector (Unlock, 2018) but completely overlooked when it comes to understanding their university experience. To address this longstanding issue, the authors have developed a localised adaptation of the established educational initiative

called *Learning Together*, to enable criminal justice academics, students, practitioners and service users to come together and learn from one another through lived experience, and professional practice.¹

Learning Together originally produced by Dr Amy Ludlow and Dr Ruth Armstrong at the University of Cambridge, aimed to provide opportunities for university students to learn alongside people serving a custodial sentence (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016). The purpose of the initiative is to promote learning amongst and between people who, ordinarily, would not have met or had the opportunity to learn from one another within custodial environments (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016), through the creation of learning spaces. Through *Learning Together*, communities of practice develop that hold the potential to address deficits in education provision in prison, whilst simultaneously challenging the exclusivity that surrounds the educational experience of many university students (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2016, p. 10). Although in its original guise Armstrong and Ludlow's *Learning Together* programme was delivered throughout the custodial estate, it has also become a model and a springboard for promoting inclusive learning environments beyond the prison gates (Gosling & Burke, 2019).

Since 2016, the authors of this paper (from criminal justice and creative writing backgrounds) have developed a unique version of *Learning Together*, one that is based in a university as opposed to a prison. The programme provides students with a unique, multi-disciplinary curriculum that spans two cognate disciplines: criminology and creative writing; (our university-based adaptation of this initiative will be identified and referred to as '*learning together*' throughout the paper). Grounded in principles of Creative Pedagogy,² *learning together* provides an opportunity for students to enhance their understanding of criminal justice, from an academic perspective, while at the same time engage in a process of personal, professional and pedagogic reflection. Throughout this paper, the authors suggest that a locally developed creative pedagogy facilitates a better insight into the university experience of students with lived experience of the criminal justice system. This insight illustrates that through the development of *learning together* as a university-based a creative pedagogy, means that students can be encouraged to engage in an ongoing process of (re)framing narrative;³ furthermore, this not only works towards building an 'authentic self-expression' (Vanlint, 2017), but enhances creative capital: the capacity to imagine and express new possibilities through creative activity

¹ The widening participation agenda was championed by the New Labour government (1997-2010) to increase and improve the number of university students from non-traditional backgrounds through targeted outreach initiatives and financial support (Burke, 2012) in an attempt to restructure higher education based on the notion of equality (Armstrong, 2008). It claims to pay particular attention to those who are from lower socio-economic groups and/or considered to have limited participation in schools and local neighbourhoods (Ibid). Research suggests that those who are at greatest risk of experiencing social exclusion as a result of factors such as poverty, lack of education, unemployment and/or being a member of a minority ethnic group are disproportionately likely to end up in the criminal justice system (Mair and May, 1997). It is therefore unsurprising to find that along with mature and first-in-family students, people with criminal convictions typically share characteristics that the Universities and Colleges Admissions

Service (UCAS) and UK government call disadvantaged (Unlock, 2018). People who possess characteristics that are not normally associated with entrants to higher education are typically referred to as 'non-traditional' students.

² Selkrig and Keamy (2017) state that Creative Pedagogy as an approach to learning, knowledge engagement and co-construction includes elements of creative teaching, teaching for creativity and creative learning. For the purposes of this paper, the authors highlight a distinction between the general principles associated with Creative Pedagogy, and the curricular practices associated with the localised development of their own creative pedagogy with the use of capitalised and lower case first letters respectively.

³ (Re)framing narrative is a way of viewing, experiencing and exploring events, ideas, concepts and emotions to find more useful alternatives (Comaford, 2018).

(Fairlie, 2012). As well as the capacity to engage with and generate knowledge creatively, participants are presented with an open learning framework, where they are free to articulate and *build* reflections of their creatively emergent selves; this in turn means that they start to understand, trust and respect themselves (Vanlint, 2017).

To illustrate how creative pedagogy provides a platform for non-traditional students to narrate their university experience, the forthcoming discussion is divided into four parts. We provide an overview of *learning together* within the host institution, followed by a concise insight into the role of reflective practice. Drawing upon work from *learning together* students,⁴ we demonstrate how and why students with experience of the criminal justice system utilise the process of (re)framing narrative as part of the creative pedagogy to build creative capital. The conclusion illustrates how creative pedagogy can be utilised to create a safe space where pedagogically-informed risks can be taken to enhance creative capital.

2. Learning Together

Since September 2016, Dr Helena Gosling and Professor Lol Burke have delivered a university-based *learning together* programme for males and females who have personal and / or professional experience of the criminal justice system, to learn alongside postgraduate students from the host institution. It is the only *learning together* initiative based within a higher education setting that works alongside criminal justice services to create a community of practice, populated by people with academic, professional and lived experience of criminal justice. Lave and Wenger (1991) suggest a community of practice consists of a group of people who share a craft or profession. Communities of practice can evolve naturally due to participants' experiences of a particular area, or they can be deliberately created with the goal of gaining knowledge and insight. Communities of practice are formed by and for people who wish to engage in a process of collective learning (Wenger-Trayner and

Wenger-Trayner, 2015). It is through the process of sharing information and lived experience that people learn from each other and generate opportunities to develop both personally and professionally (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

Although flexible, *learning together* aims to engage 20 students per academic year; ten from the postgraduate community and ten from local criminal justice services. The programme consists of 15, two-hour sessions, taught across the academic year from October to April. Each session explores the theory, policy and practice of a contemporary penological issue, through a series of accessible questions, such as 'how do we explain crime and criminality?' As *learning together* has grown and developed, the authors and course co-creators became increasingly frustrated with the pedagogical traditions, norms and expectations of the discipline; the performative or stylistic requirements associated with traditional criminal justice studies were unable to adequately capture and integrate students' lived experience into taught sessions. The emerging dichotomy between the ambition and delivery of *learning together* meant that we had to improvise and develop a cross-disciplinary curriculum that was more able to work alongside the insight, stories and lived experience of students involved with the programme.

Since 2018, *learning together* students have been given the opportunity to attend a weekly creative response session (directed by Sarah MacLennan) to explore topics such as: observation and discovery; a day in the life / a day in a past life; memory; places of (un)belonging; discovery, chance and synchronicity; stereotypes and archetypes; points of view; the decisive moment; storytelling and alternative narratives. The aim of the creative response programme is to provide a pedagogical platform for students to collaboratively engage with issues, events and stories that are meaningful to them through the medium of poetry, short stories, flash fiction and creative non-fiction (Gosling, 2019). Each of the creative response sessions provide an opportunity for academic insight, lived

⁴ The authors' obtained ethical approval from the host institutions research ethics committee to include extracts

from students work produced during the academic year 2018/19 and 2019/20.

experience and professional practice to be synthesized, discussed and challenged in a more meaningful way.

3. Reflective practice

From the inception of *learning together*, the authors made the decision to engage in collaborative teaching, supported by the principles of reflective practice. Collaborative teaching takes place when two or more people share responsibility for educating some or all students in a classroom (Villa et al., 2008). It involves the distribution of responsibility amongst a group of people for the planning, instruction and / or evaluation of a classroom of students (Villa et al., 2008). Reflective practice – a process whereby educators reflect and learn from their own teaching experiences in order to develop their pedagogic skills and professional practice (Ashwin et al., 2020), is a process that facilitates teaching, learning and understanding (Mathew et al., 2017) whilst simultaneously promoting self-awareness and critical evaluation skills (Ashwin et al., 2020). It can occur individually as a form of introspection or as part of a reflective conversation with students, mentors and/or peers (Ashwin et al., 2020).

After each taught session, the authors engaged in a process of self-reflection through the manual recording of noteworthy events and points for further consideration. In addition, the authors regularly met to discuss the programme and student participation. Although reflection is commonly associated with the process of looking back and examining the past in order to learn from what has happened, it is also increasingly associated with reflecting in action (Schon, 1983). Reflection in action aims to encourage the exploration of thoughts and feelings (Helyer, 2015), as well as look for insight to maximise self-awareness (Lacan, 1977). Reflective practice brought the authors closer together, both personally and professionally, given the frequency, intensity and depth of discussion that, more often than not, covered difficult areas and occurrences not typically encountered. This subsequently strengthened our approach, and indeed ability, to engage with the concept of collaborative teaching.

Gosling (2019) notes how participation in *learning together* holds the ability to manoeuvre students – and indeed staff – towards personally and professionally

challenging learning experiences. The pedagogic push and pull associated with the design and delivery of *learning together* motivated the authors to build a more inclusive, creative pedagogy. In building a creative pedagogy, the authors have generated pockets of non-traditional practice that shed light on how students, with experience of the criminal justice system, make sense of their university experience. Drawing upon extracts from students' work from creative response sessions, we explore how and why creative pedagogy engages students in an ongoing process of a (re)framing narrative during their university activities. Although limited in generalisability and external validity, we illustrate how a creative pedagogy can go some way to shed light on a characteristically under-researched area. We aim to capture experiences, stories, thoughts and feelings amongst students who are typically overlooked in terms of theory, policy and practice by the higher education sector.

4. 'Tell me your stories': creative pedagogy & narrating the university experience

The pedagogic borrowing (infusing pedagogic elements from different disciplines) involved in the design and delivery of the creative pedagogy, provided a way by which longstanding traditions, norms and practices associated with a particular discipline could be adapted and altered. Infusing pedagogic styles from different disciplines enabled students and staff to discover and engage in creative practices. The curricular practices associated with the development of the creative pedagogy, thus generated flexible learning spaces that allowed students to freely create and offer their stories and associations. This subsequently reinforced the idea that every learner and their autobiographic experience, matters. In being encouraged to view life experience as valid and meaningful source material for creative writing projects, important value was added to the lives of individuals who have, for one reason or another, felt excluded, insignificant and / or worthless. The process of the (re)framing narrative approach encouraged students to confront thoughts, feelings and experiences that may have made life, and indeed the university experience, more challenging. In addition, the provision of opportunities to discuss shared experiences and to

examine them from differing points of view, created epiphanic moments of learning and mutual understanding. This also had a subsequent impact on student's creative capital. In one instance, a student's experience of being in the dock at court was compared with a tutor's experience of serving as a member of the jury. During a discussion, the student suggested that from the dock it appeared that members of the jury did not care about the accused and the case. The tutor listened and went on to explain how anxious the experience made her; losing sleep and worrying about her decision. Later, as part of a writing exercise, the student described the experience of being in the dock.

Behind the glass screen you have full view of the court, looking straight at the judge who is looking at you. You're thinking what is he going to give you? Cos he ain't letting you out. Your brief and the PP are talking about the case, talking as if you are not there. You try to argue something that you don't agree with but you are not heard. You get annoyed. You bang on the glass. Everyone looks. The judge gets the hump. Your brief is playing table tennis with the PP, arguing points but the judge speaks up, he's heard enough. You think you're done, off to the cells. Even before the judge gives his speech you know what he's going to do. (Student 1; Male, 55, memoir writing excerpt, 2018).

Armstrong and Ludlow (2016) suggest that people's mind-sets influence their capacity to learn. When told about the creative response programme, students with experience of the criminal justice system typically viewed creativity as an activity that was for 'other people', as they were 'not the creative type.' This not only intrinsically dampens (if not destroys) confidence in their stories, experience(s) and ultimately themselves, but raises significant questions about how people see and define the notion of creativity. Meshack (cited in Kasanoff, 2014) suggests that the need to be creative is part of being human. One of the reasons people believe that they are not creative is due to an ingrained fear of failing (Christensen, 2012). Inspired by a famous quotation by Sir Ken Robinson (2010), if you're not prepared to be wrong, you will never come up with anything original, we foster an environment where the notion of 'getting it wrong' is banished. This is an important component of creative pedagogy as many

students who have experience of the criminal justice system have low self-esteem and are likely to have endured numerous 'failures' in life – in school, at work, family life and other significant relationships (Samenow, 2012). Through an interrogation of the fear of failure, the creative response sessions allowed students to recall and reconnect with moments in life when they enjoyed an activity for its own sake. When they played with toy cars, with Lego, with sand, nobody told them that they were 'playing wrong.' Indeed, we all have experience of creating our own imaginative worlds and getting *lost* in them. Similarly, in the classroom and the creative learning sessions, the paper, the pens, the words became 'toys'; and as such, our students were encouraged to 'enjoy playing'. Having reconnected with a love of writing, a participant reflected on his experience of the creative response sessions:

Last time I wrote I was in primary school. A long time ago. Would get lost in my writing, like I was living the story, being the hero and the villain. Anything was possible in my story. Mr Smith would let me do it because he knew I was working, not playing the class clown. I was being creative and he liked reading my stories. Suppose he could see something because he'd say 'Write a story' and I would and the pen would FLOW. Time for big school and I didn't write another story – or anything – until I came to uni and chose creative writing. Was quiet at first. Only wrote a few lines. But then, as the weeks went on, I started to get back the buzz I got when I was younger. Can go deep with some of my writing but I've been told it's good. I like writing now because I can express things and can tell my story, from another point of view and from mine. (Student 1; Male, 55, memoir writing excerpt, 2019)

Allirajah (2015) defined being a writer as the hunger to express. Disrupting negative thought patterns and self-classification (such as 'I can't write a poem', 'I can't spell' or even 'I'm not very interesting, my life is boring') is therefore a key feature of our notion of creative pedagogy, and indeed, creative capital. Allied with this, Gordon-Smith (2007, p. 231) writes, 'if you remember only one thing, make sure it is this: what makes your writing powerful and unique is you, so always learn to trust your instincts.' Through the creative response classes and the expressive activities developed as part

of the creative pedagogy, each student begins to engage with the natality of their emergent self. This includes (but is not limited to) creative teaching approaches, teaching for creativity, and creative learning techniques. During the first taught session, students are required to conduct an *interview with the self* and think about questions such as ‘what do I know?’ The openness of the themes promote a focus and appreciation of the personal, the mundane or the everyday. This promotes a gentle form of critical consciousness, with the aim of increasing confidence and belief in the self. This exercise prompts comments such as, ‘I know how to make a brilliant brew’; ‘I know how to clean and strip a rifle’; ‘I know how to keep calm now when I’m angry’. The statements develop into starting points for stories, which then lead on to wider discussions of previous life experiences; this exercise enables those who have previously been unheard to uncover and utilise a space to speak and self-discover. To illustrate this, *Student 2* (male, 28 [2019]) provided the following insight:

I feel more welcome here than I ever thought I would. Some little scally raised in Netherton doesn’t belong in uni, I would tell myself. But since coming here all those thoughts have dissipated. I do belong here. I have a hunger for knowledge and the best part of me can truly shine when I am challenged. I love debating a point and love hearing other people’s thoughts. (Student 2; Male, 28; autobiographic writing excerpt, 2019)

Creating a space for students to take risks and engage with the emergent transformative self is an important component of creative pedagogy (and indeed the accumulation of creative capital). This is the case particularly amongst those students with experience of the criminal justice system, as they express how they feel ‘different’ to other students, and see university as a place that is ‘not for them’ (Gosling & Burke, 2019). The initial sense of (un)belonging amongst students with lived experience of the criminal justice system is unsurprising, given the politicisation of access to higher education for people with criminal convictions, combined with a growing homogenisation of the higher education sector (Universities UK, 2018). Inadvertently, the creative response part of the creative pedagogic programme provides an opportunity for the personal to

become political. Through the pedagogically informed exploration of thoughts, feelings and experiences, in and around the concepts of identity and power, students are able to navigate emotions associated with (un)belonging and explore issues of powerlessness and feelings of inferiority, whilst at the same time build creative capital. One student explored the issues around belonging in a piece of reflective writing.

So much has happened in these past two years. My perspective has changed so much. Places I used to fit in now seem alien to me and old friends like strangers. I have changed as a person and so my needs have changed as well as my likes and dislikes. My friends all take drugs, drink and smoke weed and now, looking back, I have nothing in common with most, other than our mutual love of cannabis and now even that is gone for me. Now I feel out of place with my old friends and have started reconnecting with people I have more in common with. I no longer belong on the streets. I belong in the library, the classroom, the work environments suits me better. I have this hunger inside me to do better, to be better and so now finally I know where I truly belong. (Student 2; Male, 28; excerpt of reflective writing, 2019).

The following extract is taken from a piece of creative writing entitled ‘The J Word’. It was written by a *learning together* student during a creative response session that focused on archetypes and stereotypes; the student expresses how he felt after a tutor used the term ‘junkie’ in class.

When I heard the J word, it put my back up. I get annoyed and think ‘who is he to say that?’ Most times they don’t know anything about it, just saying it, playing with words they don’t really know. So when it’s said by someone who doesn’t really know the true meaning of the word, they are just describing someone with a drug problem. It makes the people they are talking about sound not a nice person, people they don’t want to be around when, in fact, they are some of the kindest caring and loving people you will meet. When I hear the J word I feel discriminated against, judged, put down, looked at badly, the lowest of the low, will do anything, stick dirty needles, use dirty water, live in shit, not a good person. When in fact they are a person who just

had things go wrong. (Student 1; Male, 55, polemic writing exercise, 2019)

The student went on to give his work to the tutor who resultantly learned first-hand how a casual reference, a thoughtless word, had caused pain. The process of creative interrogation allowed the student to negotiate 'discomforts and disruptions' (Armstrong and Ludlow, 2017), whilst at the same time alleviating connotations of blame and feelings of alienation between students and tutors. Creative interrogation turned a potentially hurtful and hostile situation into a learning opportunity for all involved.

Jackson (2013) suggests how pedagogies that engage learners with the unfamiliar, perplexing, complex and unpredictable; that encourage them to take risks and not be penalised if they do not succeed, and involve them in challenges; that demand new understanding, are more likely to require them to use their creativity. This is also situated in comparison to activities that require the replication and regurgitation of knowledge that is already known. Taught sessions on the creative response programme encourage students to engage with the writing of Georges Perec, James Joyce and the diary entries of Virginia Woolf to name just a few. The message here is that students participating in *learning together* are capable of reading, understanding and being inspired by 'difficult' and potentially complex writers. In being open, engaging with our own confusion and lack of understanding, and indeed embracing vulnerability, the pedagogic model reveals that comprehension is not always an immediate response. Grappling with such material also shows that *not* understanding, and having to think about, discuss and research a text, can also become a welcome and enjoyable part of the learning journey. This builds confidence in the ability to not simply retell, but to expressively encounter a cultural source and to artistically create its subjective meaning. The week following the Virginia Woolf session a student brought up the following diary entry:

'I picked up that hand-out. That bit about the moths was boss. She lost faith - she didn't think she could write. I read it out to my missus. I left school at thirteen and

I'm reading Virginia Woolf to the missus!' (Student 3; Male, 40; reflective journal excerpt, 2020)

Providing opportunities for students to enhance their *academic identities*, through the accumulation of creative capital, can also be found in the 'photography and writing: the decisive moment' session, which encourages students to imaginatively explore the experience of another person through the photography of Henri Cartier-Bresson (see picture below entitled 'Boston Commons, 1947'). The students are encouraged to write from the point of view of one of the people in the photograph.



He looks worried. Has he done something? Or has something happened. Been laid off? Took the takings or knows that someone has. He found a spot and slumped down to think. Go over what he can do. It's a hard choice for him, either way. He can lose a friend, or his job, or his family. He is a respectable man. Everyone around him is relaxed, chilled, laying down and he is sitting, head down, hands locked together, tense. He's out of place in his suit, and tie and shiny shoes, thinking what do I do...?' (Student 1; Male, 55; ekphrastic writing excerpt, 2019).

Within the host institution, *learning together* manages to utilise the notion of creative interrogation in both a pedagogical and pastoral sense: particularly when feelings of (un)belonging and incongruity emerge amongst students with lived experience of the criminal justice system. During a discussion about (un)belonging, one student claimed '*it was nearly over before I began*' (Student 4; Female, 60; reflective writing excerpt, 2019). After praising it as a beautifully constructed line of writing, it was interrogated further. *What do you mean? What made you feel this way?* The

subsequent piece of creative writing explained how, upon presenting herself at the university reception, and not being able to find out where the session was due to take place, she almost left – dropping out of the programme before she had even enrolled.

Do I belong in university or don't I? Finding my feet was a nice experience. Logging into the computer with your new log in material was enjoyable. Finding my way through the building not such a good experience and asking at reception where a class might be taken only one not so good experience. The receptionist couldn't help me. She wanted to know the letters before the numbers to get past go. My fault, I suppose, for not writing the room number down and looking in my module. But I was here – what more did you want? Yes, I do belong. No I don't. Mixed feelings about the whole thing. Am I a student or am I just going through the motions? (Student 4; Female, 60; reflective writing excerpt, 2019).

The aforementioned discussion provides us with an example of how the creative response programme provides a safe space, within the educational interface,⁵ for students to talk and write about their feelings. In addition, the creative pedagogy underpinning the *learning together* programme allows the educators to meaningfully engage with longstanding (but typically overlooked) issues surrounding identity and (un)belonging amongst and between students with lived experience of the criminal justice system. Rather than re-inventing the status quo and facilitating the politically motivated rhetoric of the widening participation agenda, our creative pedagogy provides an opportunity for educators and students alike to interrogate taken-for-granted assumptions about what it means to be a student as part of the university environment, and the associated experiences of learning and knowledge production.

⁵ Kahu and Nelson (2017) suggest that a student's sense of belonging is developed and nurtured within the educational interface; a dynamic space that is different for each student involved in higher education (Edwards and McMillian, 2015). Kahu et al., (2013) suggest that the educational interface is a

5. Unlocking creativity through poetry

As part of the creative pedagogy, poetry sessions focus on specific moments. As a linguistic form poetry uses concision (language, line, image) to expand (understanding, connection) – a 'magic trick' that students appreciate. Furthermore, poems and the writing of poetry generally avoid right or wrong answers. Using published poems as templates also provides students with an opportunity to think about and write their own poems; thus providing a creative and liberating route into self-expression, made all the more powerful as fewer words are required to capture and convey an experience:

Came in to it bleak

*Sat back
Counted the room
Many different faces
Different lives
All coming through
Nervous not knowing
I'm sure others felt the same
Debates learning together, life's real game
Criminology, criminologists
Opinions we all have
It's about getting to the point
Opening our minds, to figure it out* (Student 3; Male, 40, poem, 2019)

This poem was written during an induction session by a student with experience of the criminal justice system. The poem captures the anxiety, nervousness and hope felt by the student during the session. Such feelings, experiences and thoughts typically would be overlooked and subsequently go unnoticed. Capturing this emotional response provides insight of an individual's very first interaction with higher education. Hirshfield (1997) notes that poetry has the capacity to clarify and magnify existence. It is the 'emotional microchip' that serves as a compact repository for

variable state, influenced by a wide variety of student and institutional factors combined with the socio-political context within which the educational interface is situated.

emotionally charged experiences (Furman, 2007:01). The creative pedagogy which underpins *learning together* illustrates how the use of poems as models and templates helps bring focus to personal, pedagogical, and social experiences in a way that is manageable and containable for students: they feel safe.

Life can be so unfair

*But we wake up in the morning, dreading what
to wear
We have to keep strong and pray
That our loved ones are here to stay
Life can be so cruel and aggressive
That is why I am writing this message
There are more good than bad people out
there I swear
Learning Together can only be positive, so let's
not be negative
My heart goes out to all family and friends
Who ask the question why me
What have we done to deserve this?
When all we want is love and peace
So stand tall, chest out, shoulders back
And believe in hope, that one day
We can all reunite
With our lost and loved ones
Life can be so unfair (Student 5; Male, 53;
poem, 2019).*

A student with experience of the criminal justice system, wrote the above poem after a session that discussed the London Bridge Terror attack in December 2019. This was a significant and deeply personal contribution from this student. Although in attendance every week, he did not verbally contribute to classroom discussions. After being told that poetry did not have to rhyme, he wanted to write and contribute to the discussion in a way that was meaningful to him. Poetry, and other forms of creative outputs, engage with, and contribute to discussions about 'who' produces knowledge, and so, are able to provoke the reader. According to Segalo (2018), poetry offers an imaginative, metaphoric and creative take on how we make meaning about life. Drawing upon the poem *Otherwise*, written in 2005 by Jane Kenyon, students

were able to describe a day in their present life which implicitly contrasted with a day in their past life.

Otherwise

*I get up out of a nice clean bed, put my bare feet
on the carpet
It could have been otherwise.
I eat breakfast, have a shower, dress in clean
clothes.
Could have been otherwise.
I go out my new front door, put on headphones,
listen to music.
Could have been otherwise.
Got my head up.
Could have been otherwise.
Wait for the bus to come with people doing
everyday things.
Put my bus pass on the machine.
Could have been otherwise.
I'm off to have a good day.
If I'd not come to Liverpool
This all would be otherwise (Student 1; Male,
55; poem 2018)*

Creative Pedagogy can assist us in our quest to look beyond and move away from the urge to use a single lens when making sense of lived experience (Segalo, 2018). Because poetry honours the subjective experience of the individual, it is presented in a manner that is metaphorically generalisable (Stein, 2004, cited in Furman, 2007). A poem that expresses an author's emotional truth can elicit a powerful empathic reaction in its reader (Furman, 2007). The relationship between the poem and the experience of the reader can therefore be understood through the concept of multi-voicedness: meaning resides neither in the speaker or the receiver but is created through the interactions between the two (Bakhtin, 1982 cited in Furman, 2007). The interactions that take place, as a result of the creative pedagogy and the associated curricula underpinning *learning together*, provide a way through which the multi-voicedness amongst and between students involved in the programme, can be understood and communicated.

I come from

*I come from the 60s and 70s, from 5 foot and
Rizla*

*From a council estate, crime and a tough time
I come from morals, don't talk back, mind your
Ps & Qs*

*From speak when spoken to, don't hit women,
Say hello and open the door for a lady.*

*I come from Green Flash trainers, bell-bottoms
and Motown music*

Black & white telly, the test card era.

*I come from put some money in the meter,
From when you spoke to your neighbor (Student
6; Male, 56; poem, 2020)*

Furthermore, the creative pedagogy involved in the design and delivery of *learning together*, presents an opportunity for staff and students alike to engage in an organic process of creative disruption. Based within a criminal justice module, the creative response programme is designed to disrupt disciplinary norms and values. Students are encouraged to read widely across disciplinary boundaries; the classroom architecture is also physically disrupted as the tables and chairs are moved and the traditional order disregarded. Teaching activities are participatory, designed to disrupt the 'teacher-learner' power dynamic and evoke feelings of empowerment and ownership of the learning environment. Creative teaching methods are used to disrupt and reframe any historically negative associations with education and the classroom. Students may be asked to lay on the floor so that a fellow student can weigh their head; the students are then encouraged to conclude that their heads are *heavy*, because they are 'full of stories'. This activity typically generates much debate and discussion. A previous cohort emphatically recommended that all new groups engage with this activity, as it facilitates the powerful realisation that every member of the group has a unique voice.

We each have an individual way of inhabiting and negotiating the world as we approach it from the prism of our own unique experiences. Translated through the medium of Creative Pedagogy, each individual

viewpoint and experience of the world can be emphasised, voiced and therefore made valuable.

6. Conclusion

Although the exact amount of students with criminal convictions is unknown, Unlock (2018) have found approximately 1% of university applicants tick the criminal convictions box on their application form. Although this is low when compared with the eleven million people in England and Wales who have a criminal conviction (Unlock, 2018), conservative estimations illustrate how the higher education sector fails to capture, and subsequently engage with the stories and experiences of this demographic of the student body.

Jackson (2013) therefore suggests that if the moral purpose of higher education is to enable individuals to prepare themselves for the complexities and challenges of their future life, then enabling learners to develop their creative potential must be an important part of this purpose. The boundary-crossing nature of the creative pedagogy, alongside the creative interrogations that take place during *learning together* allows students to re-evaluate their worth as well as the worth of their experiences as valuable learning resources. During a creative response session, one student recounted a story of being sent to 'the moey' (a mobile shop) 'with a quid to buy Woodbines for my dad (...) There'd be half a pence change. What can I get for half a pence? I asked the shop-keeper. He took a cola bottle sweet from a jar, bit it in half and passed the remains to me.' The critical consciousness emerged when the student suddenly stopped and said 'How little did he think of me, to give me only half a sweet? He must've despised me. How little did I think of myself to accept that was okay – to take half a sweet dripping with his spit.' (Student 7; Male, 38; autobiographical writing excerpt, 2019).

Creative Pedagogy provides opportunities for students to describe and engage with resituated and transformed notions of themselves. They are able to do that *not* in the language of academia but in their own words. Lived experience is celebrated in creative ways to enhance the sense of belonging and togetherness amongst and between students. The presence of

creative disruption provides an opportunity for staff and students alike to challenge the status quo (albeit on a micro level) about 'who' belongs at university and 'what' the university experience should be. The process of pedagogical borrowing, creative interrogation and creative disruption provides a way in which the authors can creatively and meaningfully engage with the university experience of non-traditional students. The creative pedagogy and its interrogative curricula encourages students to build their creative capital by offering a space where being open and, indeed, vulnerable is celebrated; where participants come to realise that their lives contain a collection of stories and not the solely the story of being labelled as '*school dropout*', '*ex-offender*', '*being on probation*,' '*having been to prison*' and/or '*in recovery*'. Adichie (2009, p. 4) illustrates that the single or dominant label story creates stereotypes. The problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. In sharing and writing stories, and in utilising new structures and forms through which to present the stories (memoir, fiction, poems), we witness an increase in self-esteem and confidence, and a greater sense of how future stories can be self-narrated.

Creative response sessions provide an important and valuable space for students; emotional responses to formal teaching sessions can be explored and interrogated, and negative (or self-sabotaging) reactions challenged. This has implications not only for students with experience of the criminal justice system, but for anyone who does not neatly fit the typical higher education 'student stereotype', and who might feel that their lived experience is not reflected in the university environment or the curriculum. Although not formally 'therapeutic writing' the effect of personal, expressive writing is clear: students are keen to read out their homework whilst classmates always listen intently and comment intelligently. These shared moments provide acknowledgement and recognition of each other's fragility, tenacity and growing confidence. Creative opportunities have an intrinsic and tangible value (Jarvis, 2012), yet the notion of 'creativity' and what it can offer in terms of developing individual and institutional creative capital is largely missing from discussions about the role and function of higher

education. This raises significant questions about the subsequent outputs that emerge as a result of these creative endeavours; in what ways can they be framed, and formally acknowledged as having value as part of the higher education framework, as well as society more broadly. Although the findings that are presented here are exploratory, they go some way to opening up a conversation about the role of creativity and, indeed, Creative Pedagogies in higher education. As the findings suggest, such approaches can better mobilise, and subsequently represent the student voice, so that a more meaningful and accurate representation of the university experience can be captured and integrated into institutional policy and practice. With this in mind, the authors intend to develop the application of creative writing as both a methodology and creative pedagogy in an attempt to better understand and represent the 'student experience' amongst and between higher education students beyond *learning together*.

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