

Value of arts programmes in prisons: teaching creative writing at Otago Corrections Facility

Prison arts programmes exist in Aotearoa, facilitated by the Department of Corrections, under the understanding that all people have a right to art and self-expression and that art is beneficial to people in prison, prison staff and the broader community. This article will outline the literature on the benefits of creative writing programmes in prisons, before looking into how the pedagogy of those running the programme impacts effectiveness, before going into the details of the creative writing programme at Otago Correctinos F. Interspersed throughout will be creative writing pieces written by members of the 2020 writing class.

This article comes as the result of an 8 week volunteer-led creative writing programme held Otago Corrections Facility. In 2020, the project was expanded into an internship in order to publish the work done by the men in the prison, sharing their hard work with others outside the prison environment. Creative writing programmes such as these reflect the belief that arts are valuable to people in prison. This value comes in the form of intrinsic value, where those who participate in these programmes have better outcomes in terms of wellbeing and rehabilitation, in addition to the tangible societal benefits that give arts in prisons an added extrinsic value.

Haiku

*The lawyer waffled
The judge said that is not true
The truth is, who cares?*

Sandwiches

*Sandwiches for lunch
That really bloody sucks man
But eat it or starve*

Arts access is recognised in New Zealand as a right of people but also come with a vast range of benefits to individuals and the corrections environment. Art, and the self-expression that creates it, is seen as providing meaning to human existence, and is an important component of Freire's concept of humanity (1972). Prison exists as a controlling environment that forces people to conform to a structured lifestyle dictated by rules and limits their autonomy (Freire 1972). Participation in arts programmes, like the ones run at OCF, restores a degree of agency, as creative decision making empowers those in prison to make choices and have total control over the art they produce. The self-directed nature of art programmes in prisons also allows them to act as a valuable form of expression. As art is subjective, a person's interactions with the world shapes how a specific piece turns out. Each piece is a valuable way of expressing thoughts and responding to the world around you. This unique perspective of people in prison also means that the art they create is valuable not only to themselves, but also to the rest of society, as it shows the views of a group of people traditionally silenced.

Veggie Trio From Pizza Hut

My veggie trio from Tuesday was NOT up to the standard I've come to expect. Firstly, I noticed 3 types of MEAT, which I believed to be horse, dog and frog. I AM A VEAGAN! I also notice several fingernail clippings I am NOT happy. I request a full refund!

-10/10

Hi

This is your twentieth complaint and you are obviously a university student after a free handout. We @ pizza hut are here to please so we will just send you a large vegan base. No dog, horse or frog but we will send some fingernail clippings along as a bonus. As for a refund just ask your mummy for a handout.

Arts programmes provide meaningful activity for men in prison. Being a part of arts programmes fills the day with something positive to focus on. Djurichkovic (2011), notes that arts programmes allows inmates to build positive achievement into their identity through adding something enjoyable to their day in addition to providing distraction from boredom or distress.

Prison is an immense change of pace, and the contrast between the world those in prison experience and the one they see on the television screens outside is something that creative writing can help them to process. The carceral space is at once isolated from the outside world whilst still maintaining links to it, and news and current events pass through the walls via the television and through communication with friends, relatives and prison staff (Moran, 2013). It is natural for the guys to struggle with watching the outside world change while they are on the inside, and for them to be curious about the world they one day hope to re-join (Lockard & Rankins-Robertson, 2018). Creative writing specifically acts as an outlet for this and having programmes such as these provides a chance for those behind bars to connect with and interpret the world outside prison.

Chicken Week at Pac'n' Save

*The pac n save milking chicken
How did the chicken turn into a cow-chicken?
the stick man made it up maybe he is planning
surf & turf. The chicken likes
to get the job done all in one
milking and laying all in one*

The future new age chicken.

Publication of the work done by the men offers them an added connection to the outside world. Everyone in the programme was chuffed with the idea that their stories could reach people outside (Moran, 2013). From a reason to write a letter home, to regular poetry writers wanting to get their stuff out there, being able to share their work with others was a major attraction of the creative writing programme. Publication also offers something valuable to New Zealand literature. Expression through creative writing forces the reader to observe through the writer's lens and offers a valuable tool in breaking down stereotypes of guys within the facility.

Pizza on the Beach

*I'm on the beach eating Pizza.
It's windy and theres sand flying everywhere
Including my dinner.
I take a bite of the slice and its covered with grains of sand.
But I can't waste food
So I fight through the rank texture and taste
To completely devour this mixture
Of Sand, Dough and Cheese.*

Arts programmes also tend to be run by volunteers from outside the prison. Volunteer-led arts programmes provide a break from the carceral environment and hierarchy, as outside ground rules established by the prison, volunteers exist outside the prison hierarchy of control (Martin, 2017). This means that in an arts classroom, members of the programme are able to

interact on equal footing with a person from the outside, as opposed to interactions with prison staff that are necessarily driven by security. These interactions with external volunteers from outside the carceral environment provide a break from this, as volunteers unknowingly bring outside social norms into the prison. This can play an important role in reinforcing links to the outside of the prison. These connections to the outside can play a vital in adjusting to life after prison and play a rehabilitative role in addition to reinforcing identities outside that of criminality.

Tree Climbing

*I like to climb trees
Cause I think Im like a monkey
But 'm just crazy*

*I want to go run
Freedom and the sun my man
One day Ill be free*

The best practice for running an arts programme in a carceral environment involves a pedagogy that encourages participation in order for those involved to get the most out of the program. This report has already made a strong case that arts programmes in prisons provide a range of benefits to both those in prison and society as a whole. In running the creative writing programme, I learnt that in order to ensure everyone gets the most out of these programmes, it is important for the tutor to follow a pedagogy that will encourage participation and engagement. This means that facilitators should be able to adapt sessions to meet the specific backgrounds and interests of those in the class.

Kereru Story

Green and Purple with a big white chest. No more haast eagles so I'm predator free apart from those coasters with their 22 rifles. The good ole kowhai are good camo but I love the miro trees. Berries get me pissed as. Sometimes it's been told a few of my relative have gotten drunk and fallen to the forest floor. I'm lucky the miro berries ain't all seasons or else I'd be HISTORY.

It is important to recognise in a carceral environment, that those imprisoned often have a poor historical relationship with formal education. However arts such as creative writing can be made largely accessible, and even without a formal education the men in the programme turned up with their own unique background. Some developed their writing skills through writing letters home, while others liked to read and others still, had a strong understanding of rhyme structures from listening to rap music (Roy, 2018). While not everyone will have the same background in education, those in the class have all found their own path to creative writing and that should be respected by the tutor. The diverse nature of arts programmes mean that those running the programme can and should tailor the programme to meet the interest of the class.

Arts programmes in New Zealand corrections facilities stand separate from educational initiatives. In order to ensure the guys get the most out of the programme the role of creative writing classes should not be centred around learning to write or studying grammar and literature. The prisons already provide valuable literacy services, but it is important not to conflate the two programmes despite their overlap. Formal educational initiatives often exist to bring inmates into line with state expectations for literacy and education requirements, and creative writing programmes should seek to avoid these attempts at conformity to best meet the highlighted outcomes above (Martin, 2017; Roy, 2018).

Gabby's Burgers

Hey man I ate at your restaurant the other night. I heard a lot of good things so I thought I'd give it a go. Was pretty disappointed. Firstly the service sucked. I was sat at my table for 30mins before anyone asked me for my order and I'm pretty sure the waiter was racist? He looked like a skinhead. Then I got the food and holy heck it tasted so bad. I ordered a double beef burger with extra cheese and I got a fish burger with relish.

There was however a plus side to eating at your restaurant and that was that I got to leave. You suck Gabby's burgers, no stars for you.

0/10

Hi there – Sorry to hear you didn't like the food. We've never had a bad review before, is it possible you got us confused with Tayla's Burgers down the street? If you'd like to leave them a bad review you can do so [here](#).

Winning Lotto

*If I won lotto
Whole family can eat
Mum is in the struggle
I would take her off the streets.*

*Yeah I'd start flexing
And buy some nice things.*

With a mixture of writing abilities in one class comes another reason the formal structured lesson should be avoided. Structured lessons are limited in their ability to teach to one level, and in a prison environment you are likely to find a mix of ages and ethnicities and backgrounds (Martin, 2017). To try and teach to a certain level would doubtless bore some while fully excluding others, leaving much of the class restless and missing out on the program's full potential. Instead, by avoiding direct teaching, the tutor empowers those in the program by giving them the power over their own writing (Freire, 1972). This can be done through providing prompts and style challenges for the participants to explore themselves. Additionally in classes where people are initially hesitant to participate, steps can be taken to work around spoken exercises can help break the tension (Martin, 2017). During the Otago Corrections Facility programme, the men really enjoyed collaborative activities, as they took the stress off the individual to produce high quality work. In tailoring the programme to include more collaborative activities, all ages and abilities were able to participate fully and laugh off mistakes without the fear of rejection or failure.

Text Thread

Yo, just seen you come out the doctors, you all good?

*Hey, no I'm not ae.
There's something I needed to tell you*

....
*All my toes fell off last night ☹️
Ah shit man ☹️*

Above all, the classroom needs to be a enjoyable space in which participants feel comfortable expressing and sharing their ideas. Whilst still being mindful of the added security risks of teaching in a carceral environment, to truly allow for the empowerment of the class through creative writing, the best thing a tutor can do is to view the class as comprised of people first rather than prisoners, and try to make the experience a good one (Djurichkovic, 2011).

The New PM
Gabby for Prime Minister
That Would be Sinister

She didn't want to run
But ended up having a lot of fun

Now she runs the country
Which was pretty funny

Wot with all her thoughts?
With her creative ministers from the course

She worked hard during her campaign
And now she pops champagne

Running high on the new legal high
Has a private jet up in the sky

With my school mates I try
To trust her but her new ministers are sly.

The creative writing classroom acts as a doorway to the outside world. Similar to Moran's analysis of prison visitor rooms, the programmes building acts as a space where the world inside and outside the prison is able to meet (2013). Much like the transmission of ideas through prison visitor rooms, creative writing is both able to enter and leave the prison where the men cannot. This means that through their creative writing, the men of the prison had the opportunity to access the outside world, building a connection between the world in which they live and the one they hope to return to one day.

Not a scam
Congratulations!
You're the 100th person to visit our website! Reply below to receive a free gift.
Regards,
The team @ Whackygifts.com
Wow!
I can't believe I won something #blessed
I usually have the worst luck! What did I win?
Cheers
Maria
Whacky gifts
Just log on to our site and click ok and you will get a random prize!

Back at ya.
I've been told some sites are hacked. Concerning.
Maria
No, we would never scam our valued customers.
Just send your bank account and IRD number J
Fantastic! Here it is
XX-XXXX-XXXXXXXX-XX
Can't wait,
Maria

Hi Whackygifts
Thought I was going to win something, but I'm losing money out of my account.
Please help?

Creative writing programmes such as the one run at Otago Corrections Facility stand as a testament to the importance of the arts in prisons. From the perspective of those incarcerated, prison arts provides access to a cultural right, provides connections to the outside world and acts as a means of processing their change in environment. The benefits of prison arts transcends the prison boundaries, with the addition of these narratives enriching New Zealand literature and challenging stereotypes about prisoners reinforced by penal populism. In order to ensure the best outcomes in delivering these programmes the tutor should focus their teaching style to make classes accessible to all, approaching their role as a facilitator of learning rather than a teacher, and making classes an enjoyable and safe space to engage in new skills. While the prison environment provides challenges to the effectiveness of breaking down barriers in classes, creative writing and arts programmes in general still offer transformational outcomes, that enrich the lives of those in prison as well as those living outside it.

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