

Building lives through an artistic community

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of arts projects within the Tasmanian Prison Service. It argues that 'art' is a vehicle to release untapped creativity within inmates. While not utilised as a therapeutic or rehabilitative model in this exercise the outcomes for a small number of inmates have been both therapeutic and arguably rehabilitative. Moreover, by allowing inmates to succeed in their own right a process of empowerment and a belief in themselves as capable of achieving in art, education, work and life has begun. This paper highlights the problems encountered in delivering a program in a maximum-security prison, not least of all the unrealistic expectations of the promoters of the program. Importantly, the successful learning experience for participants, promoters and artists has given all parties a new perspective.

Introduction

The prison environment is harsh. Often it is a violent, hostile, oppressive, inhumane and isolating experience for those who are incarcerated. Feelings of shame and loss of self-esteem are typical. Conversely, neither is it an easy place for prison practitioners. But what if dignity and humanity could be restored? What if an oasis could be created that reduced hostilities, taught self-discipline and reduced recidivism.

Risdon prison was interested in exploring this notion and began a search for an appropriate model. According to research an arts-based program is able to address offending behaviour as well as heal and promote self-change, and self-discipline. Historically prisons are populated by two forces who have traditionally not embraced the value of education- inmates and custodial staff. These two forces create tensions and make any attempt at education problematic. Finding a process that excites and stimulates the prison community to attend education and maintain their commitment is a challenge. Navigating that program successfully to its conclusion within Risdon Maximum-Security prison is equally a challenge.

Concept of arts-based programs: An explanation

Tom Skelly (1992) says, "throughout prison, the air is thick with a kind of creativity that cleverly gets a person through the [long prison day]". There is an extensive tradition of using 'art' in prisons for a whole range of reasons perhaps the least of which is to wile away the incessant amount of time prisoners have.

Art already happens informally and formally within our prison. Informally it takes the shape of tattoos, cartoons, poetry, letters, song lyrics, ball-point and pencil drawing, colourful and intricate envelope art, woodcraft like carved lighter holders, matchstick work and the oral tradition of story telling and jokes. Formally, there could be folk art and craft tutoring, the compilation of a newsletter, art exhibitions, murals, and TAFE art courses.

Prison based art programs is not a new concept although in Australia there is no formalised national strategy. However, a national strategy exists in the United Kingdom. Director General of the United Kingdom Prison Service (2001) says the role of prison education is to address the offending behaviour of prisoners but that involvement in a classroom situation may not suit all prisoners. For these prisoners he believes that art-based programs can offer a balance of activities and the opportunity to learn through varying genres. He further states that channelling the enthusiasm for the arts into structured programs can make a powerful contribution to reducing offending (2001). Art-based programs may also fill a niche for prisoners who do not have basic education skills and low levels of literacy.

Graef (2001) says the case for art-based programs in prison is not theoretical but pragmatic and practical. He argues they offer a far more effective way to reach the same goals as formal education. In place he says, of a passive formal class art is a direct experience lived by the participants who own the journey to knowledge in ways much more likely to be retained when they leave the art program (2001). Professional artists work in prisons throughout the United Kingdom promoting the idea that art skills can act as a vehicle for the acquisition of educational competencies. Additionally, there is the realisation that art-based programs may provide many offenders with their first experience of a positive and absorbing activity (Home Office Standing Committee for Arts in Prisons 2001). The Unit for the Arts and Offenders has been set-up to oversee and report on all prison art activities throughout the United Kingdom. Art activities range from *Shakespeare Behind Bars*, musicals, opera, writing, painting, music, photography, and media (Home Office Standing Committee for Arts in Prison 2001).

The California Department of Corrections has maintained arts-based programs within all state prisons since the mid 70s. These programs called Arts-in-Corrections, have proven their success. In the late 90s an eight-year longitudinal study demonstrated that inmates who participated in arts-based programs were 75% less likely to be involved in disciplinary matters within prison and 27% less likely to re-offend once they were released. Of those that did re-offend most were likely to commit lesser crimes than for their previous imprisonment (Allen 1999). Additionally, they have proved to be cost effective (Hillman 2001). Hillman has worked as a writer for twenty years in prisons and says artists who work in California have developed best practise, have had continuing experience with successful programs and have research evidence to support claims of success. Despite these findings the United States does not have a national authority promoting arts programs in corrections. He says the strategy of using the arts not just as an instrument for conflict-resolution skills or skills acquisition or self-esteem building, but as a mechanism to aid the social reintegration of offender populations has enormous potential (2001).

Why an arts-based program at Risdon

Previously art-based classes had been held at Risdon but they did not form a structured co-ordinated approach nor use an underlying arts philosophy. More often than not if an art tutor left, the class folded. However, there is no doubt that any sort of art classes was

popular. They foster a sense of inclusiveness and hope in an otherwise harsh physical and emotional environment.

While it is valid to say a prison environment is challenging it is also valid to say that this environment is ripe for a community arts program and would have much to gain from one. The prison population could do with some healing, empowerment and expansion. Here was a captive and bored audience, a place where very few interesting and/or rehabilitative programs happened.

For a number of years an exhibition of inmate art has been held in conjunction with Moonah Arts centre and more recently with a local library. As well, in previous times writers have conducted workshop sessions and weekly art and craft sessions have been held until very recently and some Aboriginal art has been produced.

As prison practitioners we were under no illusions that creating and starting a project like this would be hard but we were confident that there was much to gain. Our next step was to talk up the idea of the program with the prison community (for the purposes of this paper the term prison community refers to prisoners). Not surprisingly, this was a relatively easy concept to sell and a small group of interested inmates joined us brimming with enthusiasm and ideas.

Not surprisingly, the prison community expressed a fear, this fear was borne out of exposing their weaknesses not just to the artists and ourselves but to their peers. As we were relying on Australia Council funding there was also a fear that we would not succeed and the prison community would again be disappointed. Working with the prison community on the grant application was part of the learning process, for instance, you do not always get what you want.

Model rationale

We were conscious that we wanted to use a model that worked with powerless and marginalised communities. Prisoners are not able to make decisions on a day-to-day basis. They are told when to get up; when to eat; when to shower; when to go to work; education or exercise; when they can make phone calls, have a visitor or see prison support staff. They do not have to be responsible for large portions of their life. The most obvious implication for prisoners is they can become institutionalised. Therefore, we wanted this project to be seen as a way to take some control and responsibility in an environment that otherwise controls and directs them.

We did not want the project to be seen as welfare but instead a skilling up and development of creativity. It was hoped that this could be achieved by using a 'start and depart' model. That is, a philosophy of self-help and self-management. This model employs professional artists who encourage development of skills and help identify resources enabling the prison community to take over the control the project at some future point. It is also a model that promotes a safe environment without hierarchies.

We joined with an experienced community writer and worked on a proposal after arts community consultation. We set-up a steering committee comprising members from: arts organisations, the Aboriginal community, the local community, the intended artists and three inmate representatives. As a committee we agreed on a direction and identified potential pitfalls. In response a strategy enabling us to work effectively was designed. The artists who became part of the project were approached because as community artists

they had previous experience working with devalued communities. We talked candidly of the vagaries of the prison system and despite the potentiality for pitfalls the Steering committee were enthusiastic and energetic. The proposal was accepted by prison management and we applied to the Australia council for a 2003 Skills and Development grant. We were successful and received a grant of \$23,000 to run a six-month writing based arts program named “Create”. This was the first ever arts grant for the prison.

The plan

Funding was given to Risdon Maximum males for a principal writer to be part of the entire life of the project plus additional money for four other artists. The project length was six months and the sessions were to be held twice a week for a two-hour session. The principal writer’s brief was to develop writing skills while the other artists (a songwriter, drummer, poet and film maker) would conduct workshops to expose the group to other art forms. It was hoped that out of this process enough written material would be generated for a quality performance piece to be produced in the second stage of the project. Further funding would be required for stage two.

The project objectives were to create high quality writing and artwork using professional artists; motivate group members to ‘break the cycle’; and to give voice to an otherwise silenced group.

We saw the project as facilitating creative expression and the gaining of skills through encouragement, in a non-threatening democratic environment with easy access to expertise. The project was intended to be self-directed with the prison community always maintaining a high degree of control. Expressions of interest were called from the prison community. We had two preliminary sessions with all interested people to explain all aspects of the project. A group of names was compiled and another session was scheduled to meet and talk with the principal writer. Out of the original fifteen names eight decided to join the group. Not every one turned up to every session but there was generally a core of four or five people. After some consultation with Melbourne based *Somebody’s Theatre Company* (who have been delivering arts-based programs in prison for twenty years) it was discovered that such small numbers are normal and to be expected.

International research supports the notion that creativity through the arts can be a powerful portent in the rehabilitation and re-educative process in a prison system. Evidence also suggests that participation in the arts process can be an effective means to reduce the risk of re-offending and producing permanent life changes. Moreover, the acquisition of a myriad of skills such as oral and written communication, generic art skills, numeracy and literacy, group processes, eliminating the use of violence and learning other ways to deal with conflict can be typical outcomes. Arts based prison programs have also found to build self-esteem, confidence and to create an atmosphere conducive for group members to examine behaviours and underlying causes of offending.

So at this point we had research evidence, the money, prison approval, prison community and artist enthusiasm and commitment.

But what really happened?

The ‘start up and depart’ model is a model designed to avoid dependency and create independence and autonomy. However, as the project evolved we discovered that historically this prison community had come up against people and groups with good ideas who come into the prison to do their stuff but find the environment so problematic that they leave never to return. There are multiple reasons for this and our project was subjected to many of them:

- (1) the prison is a tough environment to work in – physically it is archaic and depressing. Security underpins everything so often your ideas are stopped because they are not conducive to good security. This requires any group or individual to be flexible, adaptable and have an unlimited supply of problem solving techniques.
- (2) the security system means everything takes time. Calling for the group members can sometimes take up to 45 minutes (leaving just over an hour for a 2 hour session); getting approval for anything, finding resources (even if they exist) and ordering resources takes time. Sometimes the prison is in lockdown mode and classes cannot happen.
- (3) at other times our ideas are hampered by the nature of the security system. For instance, at times group members were not called for. The implications of this meant that at times only 1 or 2 members attended a session. The tensions between the security needs and the program needs led to misconceptions of the importance of regular ongoing attendance of participants. Another example of this is that we wanted to document the progress of group members using video. The plan was for all group members to do a weekly film diary (much like the diary room in Big Brother). Group members made masks that depicted their personality so that they could remain anonymous and speak their mind during the diary session. However, the system was reluctant to allow extra time for group members to go to the education section to finish the masks. Seven months later the masks still lay unfinished and thus the weekly filming was never started.

It became clear very quickly that the ‘start and depart’ model would not work. The prison population is unlike any group we have worked with before. They have very few emotional or social skills and almost without exception see the world through a narrow and fatalistic vision. Many have never started and completed anything in their lives, (well, perhaps except for a crime job). The majority of prisoners come from a low socio-economic background, most have low literacy and numeracy skills with long periods of unemployment resulting in incomplete work histories and few marketable job skills. They will most likely have been to prison more than once and probably have other people in their extended family who have also been to prison. The majority have not completed high school and few have qualifications and they have suffered multiple negative experiences of state and agency intervention. In short, these people have an entrenched version that life can be anything but successful.

Bearing this in mind we risked joining the long queue of prison activities that were started and never continued. The prison community would not have gained enough skills (or confidence) by the end of the six months to continue with some sort of arts program by themselves. It was important that we prove to the participants that we would do what we said we would do. Part of their negative approach was that they were often promised things that never eventuated. Once when we negotiated an extra session to do the masks a core inmate did not turn up, and when asked why at the next session he stated, “I didn’t believe you would turn up, nobody else keeps their promises”.

By themselves we had envisaged that to mean: setting up a writing support group, continue to write on their own or apply for further funding etc. At this end of the year and with the funding gone, the idea that the writing group would continue under its own steam was ludicrous. Moreover, the group decided they were not interested in using the body of work they had completed for a performance but neither did they know what future direction they wanted to take. In order to harness and facilitate this process it became obvious that other strategies were needed to keep the program and individual enthusiasm going in same way or other.

We did not want this program to become another negative experience for them. What was needed was continuity of program. We have achieved this through providing on-going support to those who identified they wanted to continue to be involved in a creative experience of some sort, but a key factor here is that these members decided how they wanted to be involved. We have supported their identified direction and each of these people are in the process of jointly developing their own individual plan for the remaining length of their sentence and post-release. For example, one member of the group wants to be a writer. He writes prolifically and with discipline. An experienced writer is working with him on a fortnightly basis as a volunteer mentor. His goal is to produce a publication within 12 months. Prison Education has agreed to desktop publish this work. Another group member joins these sessions although as yet he has no clearly defined goals.

An Aboriginal member wants to explore his creativity through painting. He has enrolled in an Aboriginal bridging program and has weekly art tuition. He and his tutor are working toward enrolling him as a mature-aged university student starting with one arts faculty unit and eventually progressing to a Fine Arts Degree. An Aboriginal artist who is completing her Masters Degree in Fine Arts is supporting him.

Bringing a concept like 'art as rehabilitation' to a prison was also going to be problematic. Art in prison is at best seen as a hobby to keep people occupied and at worst a total waste of time. The idea that art has an intrinsic value for both individuals and the community is not understood; nor that art can be a means of skilling people with generic job skills; or that creativity can change and heal people.

Outcomes

It has always been vital for this project to be a success to ensure the future for arts- based programs in this prison environment. Additionally, we did not want to set the group up to fail. It was a fairly safe assumption that out of the Risdon Maximum security population of 200 men there was a lot of untapped potential. Prison management did not see the project as producing "real" art. Therefore, it was important for the eight group members to have a few public events that would show the work being produced was excellent and of value.

Bearing this in mind several processes were put into place to make sure the most was made of this talent.

- The group worked on a collaborative performance overlaying poetry with drumming rhythms. This was performed to a group of prison staff. The performance was filmed and shown at a prison art exhibition.
- Postcards to a mountain – the group contributed to this Tasmanian Regional Arts suitcase exhibition celebrating the Year of the Mountain. It has and is still touring throughout the Tasmanian community.

- At the recent ‘Behind Bars’ indigenous inmate genre art exhibition at Art Mob gallery the group re-created a cell and displayed their work through graffiti and photos. The exhibition ran for two weeks.
- A portion of the group’s work will be published in a small publication. The draft of this publication is finished and will be launched at the end of the year. There will be a prison and public launch.
- A collection of the group’s work has been submitted to a bi-annual writing magazine (*The Famous Reporter*) to be published as a segment on *Writing from Prison*. A launch of this magazine will be held at the prison in 2004.

These events did several things:

- they gave a public face to the events,
- it brought the project into the public arena,
- the group achieved a tangible result through the creation, production and completion of an idea/event and,
- perhaps most importantly, each member of the group put themselves on the line by publicly voicing their own stories and giving themselves reason to be proud.

The project has also received some positive media attention.

The impact of this has been that the senior Justice Department management is supportive of the notion that art can be a valid form of rehabilitation and can be a contributor to the reduction of re-offending. The need for sponsorship by and through senior management cannot be understated when negotiating over programs in Risdon Maximum Security prison.

Additionally, it has helped to break down barriers between the outside community and the prison by making the prison community more visible and hopefully less threatening.

The group were asked what motivated them to turn up every Tuesday and Friday morning for two hours and this is what they said:

- the group created a sense of belonging and it didn’t matter where we were from and or what we had done,
- the group was a safe place to explore ideas,
- the group was based on the sharing of ideas and experiences not the shared environment,
- it was something to look forward to (“and kept me sane” as one person put it),
- it was doing something useful and with purpose,
- getting to know someone from “the outside” who treated us as equals,
- developing a relationship with an artist that did not represent power and authority,
- learning to trust in ourselves and our abilities,
- doing something enjoyable,
- working with an artist who saw our usually negative experiences as positive fodder for writing and;
- working with someone from the “outside” to create a link to the “outside” world.

Outcomes from the group

Outcomes like staging and participating in performance events are tangible but it is perhaps the intangible benefits resulting from individual involvement that possibly become more important:

- the realisation that there may be other life paths to choose
- learning self-discipline
- learning to self-reflect
- learning to see the world through another eyes rather than their own
- gaining of self-respect
- learning commitment to self, others and a project
- creating, developing and completing a project
- learning to work within a group
- acceptance of difference
- increased levels of self-confidence, the willingness to try something new and work outside their comfort zone
- experiencing personal and group success (for the most in the group this was the first time they had been successful at anything)
- learning to deal with frustrations and obstacles
- learning other ways of dealing with conflict and anxiety
- learning to understand, know and accept self

The funding for *Create* has finished and as we reflect upon the project we feel generally pleased with the development of skills and attitudes within the group. Individual concentration levels increased. The group worked toward two performance outcomes, which had definite deadlines (a poetry and drumming performance before an audience; and a writing-based installation to accompany an art exhibition). In both instances, the group needed to work together to explore, consult and develop ideas for the performances. Individuals needed the ability to personally focus on the project. In both cases, the group met their deadlines with confidence. The group worked together proficiently and effectively to produce two high quality performances. For most in the group, starting developing and completing a project was a first as was performing in public or putting their work on display. Understandably the group voiced fears of performing in public (for instance, 'what if we muck it up' etc). The drumming performance was a powerful example of individuals overcoming a fear of presentation in a socially acceptable format.

Finally, the importance of acquiring these skills cannot be understated and are entirely necessary for life success. It is too soon to evaluate the success of the program but out of the original eight, five have gone onto other things.

- one learnt meditation to manage his anxiety while in prison and has joined an art group on his release
- two have gone into further education (one to university and one to college)
- one has decided to be a writer and is being mentored by a writer on a weekly basis and. *"Writing has helped me work through my anger, I write it out, I know where it comes from now, I realise I can do something with it"*
- one has decided to concentrate on his Aboriginal art and is doing a structured art course

Additionally, an off shoot to the *Create* project has been the development of the Yala Trust which is contributing toward the building of self-esteem and supporting the artistic talent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have entered the prison system.

Future directions

Although the above outlined Risdon prison art-based programs has attracted small numbers and it is still a new concept, there is the belief that art programs can make a difference. Some of our future project ideas include:

- Working toward the self-sustainability of the Yala Trust for Aboriginal inmates
- Women Tasmania grant to produce a magazine in the Women's prison
- Arts Tasmania grant for mentoring burgeoning male and female writers
- Australia Council Skills and Development grant to pay for an Aboriginal art tutor to work with the Yala Trust members (both male and female) to build a body of work suitable to be used as designs for postcards or cards
- Submission for an ATSIC grant for producing postcards
- Setting up of arts program through sponsorship donations

Conclusion

Prison populations continue to increase. And while a prisoner is often out of sight and out of mind it is wise to remember that the vast majority of prisoners will eventually be released back into the community. Surely, it is more cogent to release people who have become better people, who can be productive and useful members of society.

- Research has indicated that art programs can contribute to reducing re-offending and thus reduce the cost of incarceration
- Prison art programs are cheap to run, relative to total prison expenditure
- Art programs result in a notable improvement in self-esteem and behaviour, and lead to an expanded worldview
- Art programs result in skill development that has value in prisoner rehabilitation
- Art program research shows that participants often move into further education
- Art programs uncover a surprisingly high level of talent amongst the prison community

We need art-based prison programs to contribute to the sustained development of human dignity. They should nurture and heal, educate and inform, inspire and promote change. A prison community is a silenced community. As Tannenbaum says, their voices are ignored or excluded from the community's larger social conversations (2000). An arts program can encourage people to voice their stories as a means to explore their own path. This act of expression and reflection can act as signal to the community that they are part of it. If they achieve this then art-based programs must help toward the successful re-integration of prisoners and the ultimate reduction in re-offending.

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