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Doing Time: the impact of prison work experience on learning and teaching.

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Introduction

This paper discusses an innovative approach to teaching and learning, under which students on the BSc (Hons) Criminology programme (and related programmes), are offered work experience positions in prisons within the North East of England. It reviews the background to setting up the work experience scheme in one of the prisons, considers the initial impact on the first cohort of students taking part, and discusses the staff and student work experiences to date. It is co-authored by three students who worked within HMP Durham and the member of staff responsible for setting up the work experience initiative.

Background

Having taught criminology for over 15 years, I am well aware of the intrinsic problems of ensuring that students graduate with a well rounded and balanced understanding about the issues that surround imprisonment. Issues surrounding imprisonment tend to monopolise my teaching and research within criminology. The prison is also a substantial element of any criminology degree programme. Imprisonment, during my teaching career, has become a principle focus of criminology as the numbers of people being sent to prison have soared. England and Wales now has the highest prison population in Europe with over 85,000 people currently held in some 140 prisons (HM Prison Service, 2010).

Criminology as an academic discipline grew at the same time as prison numbers, this growth in academic criminology, according to Young (2004), was merely a consequence of Governments shifting resources from social policy and sociology towards funding designed to evaluate the ever increasing interventions utilising criminal justice rather than welfare. As a result of this expansion in available resources, significant numbers of students have been attracted to the range of criminology and crime related programmes offered by the University sector (Hillyard, et al. 2004).

Teaching about prisons

Prior to my lecturing career, I worked in prisons and a number of other institutions that dealt with offenders. This experience afforded me an understanding and appreciation of prisons, as well as knowledge of the diverse range of issues being tackled within the institutions. On leaving this 'other world' behind, I carried with me an understanding of the complexity that is the 'prison world' and a desire to share this knowledge. The prison is a closed world known to relatively few people, but about which there is much fascination and supposition within the wider population.

Unlike any other institution the prison has to provide a range of resources for individuals with many different requirements. Prison tries to be an educational establishment, a hospital, a provider of psychiatric services, a job centre and a rehabilitation centre: but above all

imprisonment has to be seen to serve the public's growing desire for punishment. I propose the prison has a task unlike any other institution: it has to achieve the impossible.

Media Impact

Attempting to teach effectively about the prison became even more difficult with the advent of the popular media's insatiable desire for story lines depicting prison and prison life. Coupled with this increasing interest in prisons comes the distortion of the prison and life inside that is offered by many parts of the media. For example, students have been known to refer to a scene from ITV's 'Bad Girls' as if it is some great oracle on the difficulties surrounding the incarceration of women. Media revelations, for example, concerning the availability of Play Stations or televisions in prison cells, only serve to fuel an already angry public. Andrew Levy (2009) writing in The Daily Mail offers a good example with his story entitled 'Holiday camp prison: Young murderers enjoy plasma TVs, video games, a gym, sea views...and a choice of toilet seats'. Not only do these images distort the reality of prison life per se, but they leave the viewer with mixed messages of what life inside prison is really like. In many ways the prison cannot succeed in the eyes of the public: if it is too harsh, it is soon condemned; if it is too lenient, it is criticised for this also. In general the public view of prisoners is that they are the 'detritus of society' and are not worthy of any further concern (Jewkes, 2005). These images presented by the media, shape student opinion, which academia needs to then challenge by offering alternative, more rigorous observations. For example Ryan and Sim (2007, p.714) propose that prison is:

"a dysfunctional entity, as a place of punishment and pain, which instead of delivering redemption for the individual offender and protection for the wider society, is more likely to contribute to the psychological immiseration and sometimes physical destruction of offenders and to the maintenance of an unjust and unequal social system?"

It is apparent that media discourse on crime, and the subsequent representation of prison, influences the general debate about prison and the aim of imprisonment. Mason (2006) suggests that 'cultural constructions of prison' are an important component of the punitive and populist ideologies that underpin much of our current criminal justice policy. Occasionally, the media offer some well researched and carefully filmed documentary, such as the work of Rex Bloomstein, or the BBC2 documentary "Women on the Edge: the truth about Styal Prison" in 2007, which aim to challenge some of the public's firmly held beliefs about prison. However, these are soon forgotten, unlike the infamous 'Bad Girls' that ran for seven years on ITV from 1999 to 2006 and the more gentle 1970s BBC sitcom, 'Porridge'.

The Impact of Politics

It is important that students understand how political decision making impacts upon the prison system itself, those who work in prisons and those who are incarcerated in prisons. The hardening of penal sanctions is something that most of the Western world has experienced over the last fifteen years (Van Kesteren, 2009). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the public want more austere conditions in prisons and longer sentences for offenders. Governments and prospective Governments are keen to please their public and will use both prison and punishment as tools with which to gain votes. Newburn and Jones (2005, p.74) describe the failure to talk tough on crime and punishment as "*akin to political suicide*".

EMERGE 2010: Student Voice

Issue 2, pp. 32 - 42

Students need to appreciate that since the early 1990s the political emphasis on crime and punishment has increased significantly. Michael Howard's 'Prison Works' speech to the Conservative Party Conference in October 1993 opened up the flood gates and brought prisons to the top of the political agenda.

"Prison works. It ensures we are protected from murderers, muggers and rapists and it makes many who are tempted to commit crime think twice...."

Everyone has a view about prison, and the public feel that they have a right to these views, but they also believe that they hold informed views and they know what goes on inside of the prison walls.

Consequently, what we have seen is the emergence of 'penal populism'. Increased punitiveness in criminal justice policy is simply a populist reaction to the problem of crime. Mathieson (2003, p.3) suggests the changes in government discourse about criminal justice policy have shifted from discussions based upon legal and moral values, to those driven by the media and public. Hence, the debate about crime and punishment is no longer predicated upon 'principled legitimisation' but driven by political opportunism. He further suggests that the media focus specifically on reporting violent and serious crimes, which simply distorts the real picture of crime, to the extent that prison becomes the only viable solution to the perceived problem. People do automatically now associate crime with punishment and punishment with prison (Roberts and Hough, 2002).

"In the newspapers, on television, in the whole range of media, the prison is simply not recognised as a fiasco, but as a necessary if not always fully successful method of reaching its purported goals. The prison solution is taken as paradigmatic, so that a rising crime rate is viewed as still another sign showing that prison is needed"

The reality and complexity of prison life is a far cry from images depicted by both the media and politicians. Anne Owers, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, describes a prison system that is '*caught up in crisis management: making frantic efforts to find space for an ever-increasing number of prisoners, with a rising number of self-inflicted deaths*' (Owers 2008, p.7). A description those with experience of working within prisons would find very appropriate.

Student views reflect this media and political bias, which is clearly at odds with recognised academic theory. To effectively teach about the prison and all that impacts it, you first have to try to counteract populist media and political images that have been created about prisons and prisoners, before you can actually start any effective teaching and learning. It can be a daunting task. A personal experience is recounted here.

In one lecture I talked about the women's prison estate, mentioning that women could wear their own clothes and were allowed more personal possessions than men in prison. However, I pointed out that set against the backdrop of a prison system for women that had seen an increase of 145% in its population in 15 years, and had recently witnessed a far higher number of suicides and incidents of self harm than ever before, being able to have some personal possessions and wear your own clothes was a derisory pacification in contrast to what is actually required within the women's estate in order to bring it up to a

reasonable standard. For one student, the fact that women could wear their own clothing (a huge cost saving for the prison system) was a step too far. She felt that this fact alone reinforced what she already 'knew' about the women's prison estate; that it was overly lenient and more akin to some holiday camp, than the necessary punitive environment it should be. Further discussions revealed that her sources for this 'academic' discussion were 'Bad Girls', 'The Sun' and a programme viewed late at night on one of the many channels that are now inundated with series about prisons, such as 'America's Toughest Prisons' and 'Banged up Abroad'. The undisputed tough nature of American prisons simply served to support the argument that our prisons need to be ruthless in their response to prisoners. The debate centred solely on the aesthetics of the prison environment, overlooking any discussion about the ethos of what the prison can or cannot achieve with its prisoners.

Expert Speakers

Over time both my teaching style and content have developed and changed a great deal. For example, I now invite a number of expert speakers to present to students and I arrange prison visits for a lucky few. By doing this, my aim is to counteract the distorting impact of media representations of prison and of a growing political involvement in the prison system.

Over the course of an academic year, I aim to invite a number of professional guest speakers who work both within the prison environment and outside, in a variety of supportive and management roles, to talk to the student group. The students' understanding is greatly enhanced from hearing first hand experiences of those working within the prison environment. Although this is beneficial, it still leaves a gap in their appreciation and knowledge of something so alien to them: life inside prison.

Prison Visits grew

As the prison population expanded from 42,500 in 1992 to the current population of 85,000 plus, gaining access to the prison estate became increasingly difficult. As prison populations swelled in numbers, the staffing provision within the prison estate did not increase at a similar rate (House of Commons, 2009). Prisons, in England and Wales, are now extremely busy and pressurised places. Prison visits for students (where students are taken on a 'tour' of a prison in order to familiarise them with the surroundings) can still be arranged, but only for a very few studying on the criminology programmes. In addition, prison visits can vary enormously, depending on factors such as the guide, the time of the visit and the type of prison visited. Personal experience has indicated the variability in quality of such visits.

Developing Student Placements

My concern regarding the successful delivery of accurate information about the prison to undergraduates grew. The only tangible solution to the problem was to ensure greater numbers of students experienced the prison first hand. As explained earlier, gaining access to prisons is difficult. Even as a researcher or interested visitor, there are many hoops to pass through before access can be granted. Not put off by these barriers, but increasingly frustrated by them, I set about trying to secure some work experience for students within the prisons located in the North East region. There are eight prisons within the region, including a high security prison, a resettlement prison, a women's prison, two young offender

institutions, a category D prison and two Category B establishments. Prisons are categorised according to the age, gender and classification of prisoners they hold. Category A prisoners are held within the high security estate and category D prisoners are held in more open conditions.

The success to date is due, in the main, to a Governor with the foresight to recognise that students working on a voluntary basis within the prison could work well for both parties and could help address prison resource shortfalls caused by the current financial constraints

After lengthy discussions, it was agreed that third year students would gain a great deal of experience from a working two days a week with HMP Durham, and the prison itself would benefit from having students working there. Coincidentally, that same Governor became the regional manager for custodial services for the North East, which enabled me to steer this project out to other prisons within the region with his full support.

I had a cohort of students that were interested and, who I felt, were suitable for the work experience opportunities. There were more students interested in taking up the opportunity than available places within the prison. I had to select 25 students from an initial list of 80 who had expressed interest. Therefore, the procedure of selection ran like that of a formal application process for a job. A number of students were considered not suitable for the posts, for a variety of reasons. I carried out the final selection process with a colleague, and the Head of Psychology at HMP Durham. It is vital, at this juncture, that the right students are matched to suitable areas within the prison. A contract was drawn up between the University and the prison, which addressed all of the concerns raised by both parties. This formal contract was then signed by the student, and a representative from both the prison and the University. At this point the extent of support available to the student was outlined: in this case to be provided by the Head of Psychology at HMP Durham and myself.

Following a lengthy security process, lasting approximately 3 months, the first students started their induction programmes within the prison in early September 2009. Once they had successfully completed the induction, they began work in a variety of areas within the prison such as psychology, healthcare, resettlement and safer custody. Students were fully key trained, and able to enter the prison in the same way as all members of staff, picking up their own keys on entry. They were then able to make their own way through the prison to areas where they were working. The students had daily contact with prisoners; this being the component of the work experience they found the most interesting.

The impact on the students learning has been far greater than I ever anticipated. The students have all been astounded at both the amount and range of work carried out within the prison by vast teams of professionals. For all three students, internally the prison is not what they imagined at all: they described the environment as 'austere', but all enjoyed being there and felt that the atmosphere generated by both staff and inmates was positive. The experience that the students gained within prison has been immeasurable; changing their view of prisons, prison staff and prisoners. In addition to this, they now consider themselves better equipped with the skills and knowledge that should allow them to stand out from other graduates on entering the job market.

EMERGE 2010: Student Voice

Issue 2, pp. 32 - 42

What follows are three individual student's accounts, written in their own words. All worked two days a week within HMP Durham, carrying out a variety of roles and working in different areas of the prison.

Jamie Smith

I started my work experience at HMP Durham working within the Safer Custody and Psychology Departments. I am in my third year at Northumbria University studying Criminology and Forensic Science. Throughout my studies, I have always been torn between which area of the degree I am more interested in working in, once I graduate. I thought I was more interested in the science side of the degree, but I am not so sure having had the opportunity to work in the prison environment.

Within the Safer Custody department, I worked with the Foreign National Officer and helped with the day-to-day duties. This mainly involved speaking with the Foreign National prisoners and gathering data. Usually, this takes the form of a standard questionnaire: checking if their personal details are correct, why they are in the country, and then trying to ascertain as to whether they wish to go back to their home country or claim asylum in the United Kingdom. Working with vulnerable people in prison and finding out where they come from, how they have arrived in the country and their reasons for coming here, gives you access to very personal and humbling information.

There are a large number of Foreign National prisoners at HMP Durham, thus creating quite a large language barrier. Having said this, through translation techniques using English speaking prisoners and with a great deal of patience, the vast majority of prisoners understood what was happening and were co-operative with the process.

When working in the Psychology Department, the information collated there is very different to that is used by the Safer Custody department. Even when working on documents that concern the same prisoner, the approach used by the various departments is very different. For example, the Psychology side of the work will focus on any psychologically based issue raised on the prisoner's case files and assess whether they are a danger to a certain cohort of people within the prison. This is in contrast with the work in Safer Custody where the work deals with issues relating to self-harming, suicides and diversity within the prison.

The Prison Addressing Substance Related Offending department (P-ASRO) concentrate upon substance misuse and aim to reduce prisoners' use of substances. When working in this department my work consisted of either sending out letters to the prisoners concerning their drug treatment programmes, or working on updating the databases containing information on all prisoners that are linked to the Psychology and P-ASRO departments.

Working within the prison environment has helped me greatly in respect to the work that I do for my degree. Lectures and discussion in seminars can only tell you so much about prison and the environment in which prisoners are held. For me it all becomes "real" when you are actually in that environment. Being inside the prison and seeing first hand the size of the cells and experiencing the smells and sounds of the prison is not something that you can really fully appreciate until you encounter it first hand.

From inside the prison it is easy to see the different dynamics at work: the complex world of incarceration becomes clearer. Articles and books that I have read about the prison make

more sense to me now. I was interested in prison culture before I started work at HMP Durham, now I understand the literature that talks about prisoners from different parts of the country tending to group together and how this can cause problems within the prisons.

Working in this environment has also helped me understand about how the prison service as a whole works and enables me to appreciate the many things that occur “behind the scenes”, which never seem to be mentioned by the media. At HMP Durham there is a large waste management centre, which recycles almost all of the materials being used by the prison. This is a really remarkable scheme. The job training programme run by Durham and various outside organisations is also impressive, and offers training for prisoners in order to enhance their chances of employment on release.

Although I have only spent a few months in the prison, the experience has had a big impact on my learning and understanding of the subject matter. My views have changed towards prisoners and prison in general. Even as a criminology student, my opinions on what prison was like were highly influenced by TV programmes and stories in the media. Prison is similar to a school: the officers are the teachers, and inmates are the pupils.

Callum Walker

The opportunity to carry out work experience in Durham Prison has allowed me to gain a good understanding, not just of the prison system itself, but also what lies ahead in terms of actually working and leaving my sedentary student lifestyle. I feel privileged to have been given the opportunity to work in the prison and see what goes on behind the formidable walls. I recognise the amount of trust being placed in me and the amount of responsibility I have taken on as a result

Working with the criminology tutors in trying to achieve the same goal in actually getting into the prison and getting started, has made me see the department as more than just people who deliver lectures, but as people who genuinely care about my future. The experience has also made me feel more comfortable and confident about speaking to my lecturers and asking for help with my course work.

The experience of being in HMP Durham has undoubtedly helped me academically. There is only so much that you can learn from lectures and books about the judicial system, and more specifically, the prison system. You can be told about how prisons are run, the regime that prisoners adhere to, the conditions they are kept in and so on, but it is only when you see it first hand, that it really hits home that prisons contain a vast number of people whose whole lives are completely out of their own control.

Prior to starting the work experience in HMP Durham, I had an idea of what prison was like through reading textbooks, but the reality is far harsher than I imagined. Although I believe that people who commit crimes should be punished, I believe the complete loss of liberty, i.e. being in the prison itself, should be the punishment. Further punishment, such as being locked in your cell for 20 hours a day is not necessary. It is all too often the case that people are sent to prison and are completely forgotten about for however long their sentence is and then re-introduced back into society, more criminalised and alien from society than ever before.

EMERGE 2010: Student Voice

Issue 2, pp. 32 - 42

The startling thing I have noticed since working at HMP Durham is the age at which the prisoners first become engaged with the police and the prison service. The majority of cases I have come into contact with involve people from deprived areas who are drawn into crime before they are 15. Something should be done with these vulnerable members of society long before prison is even considered. The rising prison population is as much a reflection of our failings as a society to help vulnerable people, as it is a response to (supposedly) rising crime rates.

Leaving the prison is a strange sensation, as throughout the day you are held in the same environment as the prisoner, behind a huge number of heavy steel doors, high brick walls and barbed wire. Getting out of the prison can take at least 10 minutes. Walking away from the prison, I experience a sense of elation at just being allowed to walk away, free of the restraints of the institution. However, and ironically, part of me still wants to be there and looks forward to going back the next time.

Within HMP Durham I worked in the P-ASRO department. P-ASRO is a high intensity course that helps prisoners, whose offending behaviour is a result of drug use, look at their lifestyles and drug addictions and try to change their behaviour. The work that goes on is extremely worthwhile, and it is worth noting that the P-ASRO team receive a large number of letters from prisoners, after release, thanking the team for helping them change their lives. It is the idea that you can make a difference to someone's life that makes me want to keep going back to such a cold, austere establishment each day.

Morgan Richards

I thought that working in the prison would be a great opportunity to enhance my learning and gain work experience in a job specific role.

There were a number of different roles that we could choose from in terms of the various departments within the prison offering work experience opportunities. I am currently working in the Psychology department but this also overlaps with the drug misuse team known as P-ASRO. Initially, I thought that I would be solely based in Psychology; however I was able to move to another department to broaden both my knowledge and understanding of the prison and how it works.

My main role within the prison was to shadow Psychology professionals and assist them in day to day work. This involves a wide variety of tasks such as taking minutes in meetings, collecting data from wing observation books and transferring confidential files. I recently sat in on an assessment of a prisoner; this involved considering the prisoner's suitability for the anger management programme. I was able to ask questions about offending behaviour, feelings about anger and if the prisoner could deal with situations that he could potentially face within the establishment. I found this very useful as I was able to watch an assessment take place and subsequently find out what factors would make a candidate suitable for this specific programme. I have also been able to access information collected from prisoner questionnaires which contained details of their offences, employability, and accommodation arrangements on release and whether or not the offences were substance related. This information was also used to inform my final year dissertation which explored the effectiveness of prison and contributing factors that lead to re-offending.

I have been involved in debriefing some of the staff after P-ASRO sessions have taken place. This has allowed me to understand how each session is delivered and what is expected from the facilitators, in terms of session plans, getting prisoners to participate and also making sure that the session is delivered in a way that allows the group members to effectively communicate their feelings, whilst facilitators manage the groups and time efficiently.

Working in the prison environment has greatly improved my confidence with regards to obtaining a job at the end of my degree. Working alongside a mix of professionals has encouraged me to want to learn more about all aspects of the prison and has influenced my career decision making. There is a huge difference between being a student and working full time: my appreciation of this now will make it easier for me when I make that transition.

Initially, the prospect of entering a prison was a very daunting one, as the only view of prison I had was one which is portrayed by the media and information delivered through lectures. However, since entering the prison, my view has changed significantly towards both prisons and prisoners. Prison is not the “holiday camp” it is made out to be in the media. It is a holding ground for some of the most dangerous and damaged individuals in society. It is actually quite saddening to see so many lives ruined by drugs, crime and poorly made decisions. The work that is done within prison is vast, but it still feels that there is a lot to be done to reduce re-offending. My eyes have been opened to both the issues and difficulties faced by staff, and the many and complicated issues facing prisoners inside and outside of the prison. Moreover, this opportunity has allowed me to see first hand the impact of judicial legislation on both individual prisoners and the prisons themselves.

Concluding Thoughts

Time spent in HMP Durham has provided students with remarkable work experience, and the subsequent impact on their learning has been exceptional. The timing of the work experience meant that they were able to use their newly gained knowledge to inform their final year dissertations. The students were also able to share their learning experience with other students during seminar work. Students were able to relate first hand understanding of the prison to both the academic evidence and the less rigid thoughts and observations of the media. The ensuing debates were interesting and challenging, with a level of discussion not normally ascertained whilst teaching undergraduates.

The process of establishing work experience opportunities for students within organisations dealing with offenders has been long and complicated, but ultimately, very worthwhile. There are many issues to consider before embarking on such a journey and others that arise from discussions with professionals working within the identified organisations. This issue of confidentiality is brought up by prison Governors and staff time and again during the process of attempting to secure access to prisons for students. Although there is a comprehensive work experience agreement document that students have to sign, it is imperative that the student understands the sensitive nature of the environment that they will be working in. In this modern era dominated by social networking, the issue of confidentiality requires full understanding and appreciation of the many consequences, should it be breached, well in advance of any student crossing that threshold into the prison.

Students studying criminology are part of the continually increasing numbers of social scientists seeking work within a depleted job market. There is an expectation that graduates will have at least 6 months work related experience prior to completing that first job application. Work experience is not something that is necessarily considered when opting for a degree within the social sciences. This may all change with David Willetts calling for universities to publish “employability statements” and ensure that their students are job ready (Docherty, 2010).

The benefits of the work experience are clearly outlined above and there is a wealth of academic evidence to support this (Guile and Griffiths, 2001; Lucas and Tan, 2007). In terms of the student’s journey through higher education, the understanding gained from the work experience within the prison will be pivotal to their whole learning experience. The students now have valuable work experience, added confidence as a result of gaining both new knowledge and experience, and an appreciation of the necessary skills needed in order to make a successful transition from university life to work life.

There are now a cohort of students working on a voluntary basis with NOMS (the National Offender Management Service), the Local Youth Justice Board (Durham and Darlington), NEPACS (a local organisation that staffs and supports the prison visitor centres), and the Youth Offending Team (Newcastle). There are also a number of students about to embark on work experience positions with other prisons within the region. Once a suitable period of time has elapsed, I intend to carry out focus groups with students who have carried out the work experience, in order to assess what impact working in the prison has had on their learning experience. It is too early to draw definitive conclusions, but I am greatly encouraged by both the initial feedback from the organisations and responses from students engaged in this process.

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