Viewpoint

Learning Together: forging belonging among students with experience of the criminal justice system

Helena Gosling, Lol Burke and Sarah Maclennan

Faculty of Arts, Professional and Social Studies, Liverpool John Moores University, Redmonds Building, Brownlow Hill, Liverpool L3 5UG, UK

Contact: h.j.gosling@ljmu.ac.uk; l.burke@ljmu.ac.uk; s.a.maclennan@ljmu.ac.uk

Abstract

The Learning Together methodology at Liverpool John Moores University attempts to open up higher education for people with criminal convictions. Applied in a criminal justice course, Learning Together aims to create a safe space for criminal justice academics, students, service users and practitioners to come together and form a unique community of practice whereby scholarly activity, life events and professional experience are recognised, applied and practiced within and beyond the classroom. As the initiative has grown and developed, course co-creators have recognised how community engagement as a pedagogical framework holds the ability to reduce cultural distance between academic researchers and the communities in which they work whilst at the same time enriching learning and strengthening communities. This paper provides an insight into the initiative and reflects on how belonging can be embedded via a connected curriculum framework.

Keywords

criminal justice education; belonging; student engagement; creativity; curriculum

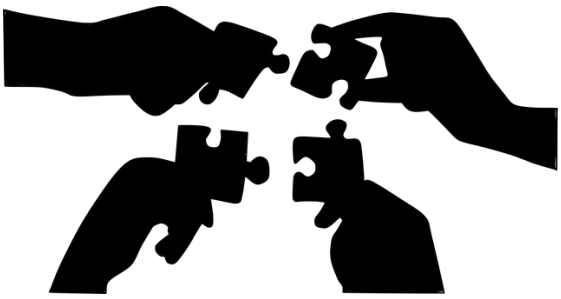
Please cite this paper as:

Gosling, H., Burke, L. and Maclennan, S. (2020) 'Learning Together: forging belonging among students with experience of the criminal justice system', *Innovations in Practice*, 14 (1): 14-22

Learning Together

Although the involvement of people with criminal convictions in higher education (HE) is anything but a new phenomenon (Connor and Tewksbury, 2012) there are limited opportunities on both a local and national level for people with criminal convictions to access HE (Gosling and Burke, 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-averse bureaucratic university admission processes (Bhattacharya et al., 2013). Although the Secure Environments programme at The Open University help people serving a custodial sentence to access HE, bespoke opportunities for people with criminal convictions to participate in HE are generally non-existent (Gosling, 2019). A recent social movement, pressuring organisations to 'ban-the-box' went some way to rectify this, playing an instrumental role in a UCAS decision to remove the criminal convictions disclosure box from university application forms (Weale, 2018). However, rather than eradicating the process, UCAS have merely displaced it with responsibility now firmly placed at the door of each individual university (Gosling and Burke, 2019).

The underrepresentation of students with criminal convictions is a significant issue for the sector and society more broadly. It provides a stark contrast to the inclusive rhetoric of the widening participation agenda and raises a series of questions about the role of universities in the twenty-first century. This paper outlines the design and delivery of Learning Together (LT) at LJMU: an educational opportunity for people who have academic, personal and/or professional experience of the criminal justice system.



The story so far

Since September 2016, Dr Helena Gosling and Professor Lol Burke have delivered the first and only university-based LT programme for males and females, who have personal and/or professional experience of the criminal justice system, to learn alongside criminal justice postgraduate students from LJMU. LT aims to create a safe space for criminal justice academics, students, service users and practitioners to come together and form a unique community of practice whereby scholarly activity, life events and professional experience are recognised, applied and practiced within and beyond the classroom. As the initiative has grown and developed, course co-creators have recognised how community engagement as a pedagogical framework holds the ability to reduce cultural distance between academic researchers and the communities in which they work whilst at the same time enriching learning and strengthening communities. Community-engaged pedagogy embraces a form of experiential education that encompasses both curricular and co-curricular activities, where learning occurs through a cycle of action and reflection as both students and teachers seek to achieve real objectives for the learning community as well as a deeper understanding of skills for themselves (Brandy, 2018). It provides a

way in which academic insight and lived experiences can be integrated to create organic teaching and learning opportunities whereby students, staff and community services are all educators, learners and generators of knowledge. Community-engaged pedagogy is an important tool for LT as it provides a way in which the traditions, norms and expectations of the academy can be stretched to reduce sociocultural incongruity (Devlin, 2011) and alienation (Mann, 2001) amongst and between traditional and non-traditional students.

Organising Learning Together

- 15 two-hour sessions, taught across the academic year (from October to April).
- Each session explores a contemporary penological issue, with questions like: 'how do we explain crime and criminality?' and 'why do people stop offending?'
- All students keep a reflective diary throughout the duration of the programme which is marked as a pass or fail.
- LT aims to engage no more than 20 students per academic year – with approximately ten from the criminal justice postgraduate community and ten from local criminal justice services (including practitioners and service users).
- All interested parties must apply via a bespoke application form that explores an individual's motivation for participation, their hopes and fears.
- Applicants from outside of the institution are also required to complete a criminal convictions form.
- All applications with relevant unspent criminal convictions are considered at a bespoke criminal convictions panel that aims to mirror institutional policies and practices, whilst at the same time creating a process that is transparent and progressive.

As LT has evolved, we became increasingly frustrated with the pedagogical traditions, norms and expectations of the discipline. This is predominately due to the fact that the performative and 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 LT inspired the development of a cross-disciplinary curriculum that was more able to work alongside the insight, stories and lived experience of students involved with the programme. This simultaneously enriched and ultimately celebrated the role of the student voice in both the design and delivery of the programme. Consequently, since 2018 LT students have been given the opportunity to attend a weekly creative response session (directed by Sarah MacLennan). 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. Each of the creative response sessions provides an opportunity for academic insight, lived experience and professional practice to be synthesized, discussed and challenged in a more meaningful way. In doing so, the curricular practices associated with the development of a creative pedagogy generated flexible learning spaces that allows students to freely create and offer their stories/experiences. In being encouraged to view life experience as valid and meaningful source material for pedagogic projects, further value was added to the lives of individuals who have, for one reason or another, felt excluded. Soria and

Stubblefield (2015) suggest that students who have greater awareness of their own strengths and capabilities, particularly when supported by the curriculum, are more likely to feel that they belong, and so, complete their studies.

Belonging

The provision of a cross-disciplinary curriculum has provided a way to uphold theoretical principles and ambitions of the initiative as well as an opportunity to critically appraise (in theory and practice) the meaning and relevance of the university experience amongst students with criminal convictions. We have known that students with criminal convictions see themselves as 'different' from other students, describing university as a space that is 'not for them' (Gosling, 2017). This sense of incompatibility is heightened by the fact that existing literature and publically available HE policy documentation tends to overlook university students with criminal convictions.

As HE transforms into an 'experience economy' we see universities document ambitions to put students at the heart of its endeavour by 'enriching student experiences characterised by social diversity and cultural relevance. Yet in practice, when we mobilise initiatives such as LT, we see more than ever before, the selective nature of such endeavours. For example, although we know that the number of people with criminal convictions who are applying and successfully obtaining a place at LJMU is increasing, they remain unaccounted for in theory and practice: discussions in and around students with criminal convictions are firmly situated in admission and governance processes that assess the suitability for study based on 'relevant criminal convictions' (LJMU, 2020). Given the freedom afforded to HE institutions in light of UCAS's ruling to 'ban-the-box', such practices seem misaligned - particularly when we know, that such processes are based upon self-reported data and no further official checks are conducted with successful applicants to non-professional programmes of study.

Belonging is significant as it helps us better understand personal and academic development, the connection individuals have with their environment and the changes that take place within it (May, 2011). As it requires a complex, highly personal interaction with the environment (Araujo et al., 2014) the academic sphere is an important site for nurturing participation and engendering a sense of belonging (HEA, 2012). Kahu and Nelson (2018) 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 HE (Edwards and McMillan, 2015). The educational interface, and indeed the notion of belonging, is a subsequently variable state that is influenced by a wide variety of student and institutional factors, as well as the socio-political context within which the educational interface is situated (Kahu et al., 2013). Traditional HE students bring economic, cultural and social capital, valued by HE institutions, that is indicative of power. This is because the institutional habitus of the HE sector more easily recognises and favours the knowledge, experience and capital of traditional students (Thomas, 2012). For those whose knowledge, experience and capital are not equally valued by HE institutions, a sense of sociocultural incongruity (Devlin, 2011) and alienation (Mann, 2001) can develop. This is a particular concern for non-traditional students (typically from disadvantaged and underrepresented social groups) as the limited overlap between one's lived

experience and the context of HE means engagement can be more challenging (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

Belonging and engagement in HE is a highly complex process involving identity and power struggles (Lea and Street, 2006). Through her work on LT, Gosling (2019) found that HE can be a site of both transformation and resistance. Although the existing literature highlights the transformative potential of HE, particularly for those with lived experience of the criminal justice system (Maruna et al., 2004), little attention has been invested in how HE can provide a site of resistance for those who have been involved in the criminal justice system. Gosling (2019) builds upon the sentiments offered by Field and Morgan-Klein (2010), suggesting that students involved in LT with lived experience of the criminal justice system defined 'studenthood' as an act of resistance. Although a students' sense of belonging is widely recognised as critical components of the HE experience, the mechanisms that facilitate belonging and foster engagement (within the educational interface) are still to be clearly and concisely articulated (Kahu and Nelson, 2018).

Selective widening participation agendas, combined with lower completion rates for non-traditional students (Hellmundt and Baker, 2017) highlight a need for new ways to understand the student experience and enhance belonging amongst the student body. Despite its conceptual ambiguity, Sim et al., (2018) suggest that the concept of belonging has taken on critical importance in the existing literature because of its impact on student outcomes, retention and completion rates.

Although such concepts have been identified as crucial ingredients in HE policy and practice, their meaning and intention remain elusive due to the variety of individual, interpersonal and institutional factors at play (Kahu et al., 2013). Existing attempts to understand student engagement and belonging have resulted in the emergence of multiple definitions and varied interpretations of the concept, which have contributed to the creation of a body of work that can be (and often is) manipulated to denote institutional performance and educational quality (Schlak, 2018). With this in mind, one must recognise that despite the conceptual and methodological limitations which surround research on student engagement and belonging, the subject area possesses an underlying political character that has become increasingly distorted and influenced by the marketisation of HE (*ibid.*). Scholars such as Buckley (2018: 723) are critical of research into student engagement and belonging due to its apparent sympathy with neoliberalism, and affinity with neoliberal ideals such as performativity and accountability (Theobald, et al., 2018). With this in mind, it is possible to suggest that students with criminal convictions have not been overlooked within HE theory, policy and practice but systematically ignored in light of neoliberal ideals about crime and those who end up in the criminal justice system. This subsequently raises significant questions about the role or function of HE in the twenty-first century.

Implications

The motivation behind our desire to set up LT was largely fuelled by a dissatisfaction with the way in which students with criminal convictions accessed and experienced HE. LT provided an opportunity for LJMU to open its doors and work alongside local criminal justice agencies in a new way. Fung (2017) suggests that good education is about helping to create societies in which citizens

value the humanity and rights of others. Although such sentiments resonate with the theoretical ambitions of HE, as the previous section illustrates, when it comes to students who have criminal convictions, there is a considerable amount of work to be done in terms of enhancing the visibility of this issue throughout the sector. It is only when such issues are formally recognised, that institutional change and investment can take place. This is not to say that all students who have criminal convictions experience the same issues during their studies. Rather, such endeavours are a recognition of the fact that we do have students who have criminal records in our institution and, in addition to this, we also have students who have been affected by a family member's involvement in the criminal justice system and/or have been a victim of crime. Through LT, we have learnt that attempts to pretend that criminal justice issues are something that happens beyond the remit of HE is misguided and ill-informed, reinforcing the idea that people with criminal convictions do not belong in HE.

Maguire (2019) suggests that many contemporary strands of HE policy work are about ameliorating past injustices, ensuring forms of inclusion, as well as attempting to give some recognition and respect to the excluded and maligned 'other.' Yet evidence would indicate that policy work (including the widening participation agenda) reinforce past injustices and exclusion when it comes to students (prospective and current) with criminal convictions.

This raises significant questions about the role of the student voice amongst students with a criminal conviction. If they are not recognised at an institutional level, how are their needs supported on a day-to-day basis? If staff are not provided with awareness raising opportunities in and around this area, how will they know what inclusive practice looks like? LT has taught us that inclusive practice is not just about supporting people to access university, it is about understanding the make-up and experience of our student body so that we can promote meaningful engagement throughout the duration of ones at university.

To uphold principles of a truly inclusive modern civic university, institutional policy and practice regarding students with criminal convictions ought to extend beyond the governance department and discussions about risk management. Given our experience of LT, it is suggested that there is a need for a more connected curriculum framework; to open up areas of dialogue among faculty members, students and professional staff to cultivate new possibilities for practice (Fung, 2017). At the heart of the connected curriculum framework is the desire to stimulate discussion about important relationships between research and education; between diverse people and their different knowledge horizons; and between academia and the wider community, underpinned by the notion that education is relational, not just in the sense that we need to engage in dialogue to learn as we study and/or research but that the purpose of education itself, is to create societies in which dialogue, respect for others and openness to new ideas are promoted (*ibid.*). In doing so, this would allow initiatives such as LT to move beyond experimental to standard practice.

According to Fung (2017), the focus of the connected curriculum framework is not just on the 'effective' learning of individuals, but also on HE as a values-based, research-education ecosystem that need to be connected as a whole. It is common for institutions to treat various strands of their

activity as if they are separate – but we need to draw on the synergies between these areas. Bringing together criminal justice and creative writing helped to create a creative curriculum that was inclusive and engaged students in an innovative, non-traditional fashion. Such partnerships also illustrate how creative pedagogies that push the boundaries of disciplines may provide a contemporary response to a more diverse learning community. For example, one student utilised the creative response session to articulate his learning from LT sessions through the medium of poetry rather than traditional narrative styles of writing expected from criminal justice students.

Although LT has been recognised as best practice by Ian Bickers (Deputy Director, Education, Employment and Accommodation, HM Prison & Probation Service), there is a fear that the initiative is plaster for a broken leg; providing a micro-society of inclusion within a sector that, on the whole, does not seem to recognise (or perhaps want to accept) that a growing proportion of the student population will have criminal convictions (whether they declare them on admission or not) and/or experience of the criminal justice system. The connected curriculum represents a good way to cultivate new ways of thinking and narrating what it is to be a university (Fung, 2017).

Conclusion

Delivering LT has forced us to think about the idea of inclusive practice and question whose definition of inclusive practice we are working towards? Is it the institution's version of inclusivity or our students? In doing so, we have thought about the idea of innovative practice and whether or not such interventions help or hinder endeavours to provide truly inclusive learning environments.

Helena Gosling *is Senior Lecturer in Criminal Justice and programme lead for the MA Criminal Justice and MA International Criminal Justice at Liverpool John Moore's University. Helena has a particular interest in alternative responses to lawbreaking and those who break the law.*

Lol Burke *is professor in Criminal Justice and specialises in the area of probation research, policy and practice. He has an extensive publication record in probation policy and practice related areas and was editor of the* Probation Journal *from 2007 – 2016.*

Sarah Maclennan *is Programme Leader in Creative Writing. Winner of an LJMU Amazing Teaching Award (2013), Sarah served for six years on LJMU's Board of Governors, and three years on the Academic Board. She works extensively on community writing initiatives, and is a trustee of a small arts organisation that promotes poetry in Merseyside.*

Innovations in Practice is Liverpool John Moores University's peer-reviewed journal on learning, teaching, student engagement and higher education.

References

Araújo, N., Carlin, D., Clarke, B., Morieson, L., and Wilson, R. (2014) 'Belonging in the First Year: a creative discipline cohort case study', *International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 5 (2): 21 – 31

Buckley, A. (2018) 'The ideology of student engagement research', *Teaching in Higher Education*. 23 (6): 718 – 732

Bhattacharya, D., Kanaya, S., and Stevens, M. (2013) *Are University Admissions Academically Fair*? Department of Economics, University of Oxford, retrieved from: http://www.skope.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/WP115.pdf (accessed July 2018)

Brandy, J. (2018) 'What is service learning or community engagement? [Teaching Guide], Center for Teaching, University of Vanderbilt, retrieved from: https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/teaching-through-community-engagement/ (accessed December 2020)

Champion, N. and Noble, J. (2016) *What is Prison Education For? A Theory of Change Exploring the Value of Learning in Prison*, Prisoners Education Trust, retrieved from: https://www.prisonerseducation.org.uk/data/Theory%20of%20Change%20Report%20FINAL (accessed July.2018)

Connor, D. and Tewksbury, R. (2012) 'Ex-offenders and educational equal access: doctoral programmes in criminology and criminal justice', *Critical Criminology*, 20: 327-340

Devlin, M. (2011) 'Bridging the socio-cultural incongruity: conceptualising the success of students from low socio-economic status backgrounds in Australian higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, 1–11, DOI: http://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2011.613991

Edwards, D. and McMillan, J. (2015) 'Completing university in a growing sector: Is equity an issue? Australian Council for Educational Research' retrieved from: http://research.acer.edu.au/higher_education/43/ (accessed January 2019)

Fung, D. (2017) *A Connected Curriculum for Higher Education*, London: UCL Press

Gosling, H. (2017) 'Creating and developing inclusive learning environments beyond the prison gate' in Fletcher, S. and White, H. (Eds.) *Emerging Voices: Critical Social Research by European Group Postgraduate and Early Career Researchers*, London: EG Press

Gosling, H. (2019) *What Can We Learn from Learning Together? Exploring, Embracing and Enhancing Criminal Justice Higher Education Partnerships*, (ICCJ Monograph 11), London: Napo, retrieved from: https://www.napo.org.uk/sites/default/files/ICCJ%20Monograph%2011.pdf (accessed August 2020)

Gosling, H. and Burke, L. (2019) '"People like me don't belong in places like this." Creating and developing a community of learners beyond the prison gates', *Journal of Prisoner Education and Re-entry*, 6 (1), DOI: https://doi.org/10.25771/c5qj-fh19

HEA (2012) *Building Student Engagement and Belonging in Higher Education at a time of Change. A Summary of Findings and Recommendations from the What Works? Student Retention and Success Programme*, York: Higher Education Academy, retrieved from: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/system/files/what_works_summary_report_0.pdf (accessed January 2019)

Hellmundt, S. and Baker, D. (2017) Encouraging engagement in enabling programmes: the student perspective, *Student Success*, 8 (1): 25 – 33

Kahu, E. and Nelson, K. (2017) 'Student engagement in the educational interface: understanding the mechanisms of student success', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 37 (1): 58 – 71

Kahu, E.R., Stephens, C., Leach, L. and Zepke, N. (2013) 'The engagement of mature distance students', *Higher Education Research and Development*, 32 (5): 791–804

Lea, M. R. and Street, B. V. (2006) 'The Academic Literacies model: theory and applications', *Theory into Practice*, 45 (4): 368–377

LJMU (2020) 'Applicant and Student Criminal Convictions Policy', retrieved from: https://www.ljmu.ac.uk/~/media/sample-sharepoint-libraries/policy-documents/189.pdf?la=en#:~:text=2.2.,at%20the%20point%20of%20application (accessed September 2020)

Mann, S. J. (2001) 'Alternative perspectives on the student experience: alienation and engagement', *Studies in Higher Education*, 26 (1): 7–19

May, V. (2011) 'Self belonging and social change', *Sociology*, 45 (3): 363 – 378

Prison Reform Trust (2017) 'Prison: The Facts', Bromley Briefings, Summer 2017, retrieved from: http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/portals/0/documents/bromley%20briefings/summer%202017%20factfile.pdf (accessed July 2017)

Sim, M., Conduit, J., and Plewa, C. (2018) 'Engagement within a service system: a fuzzy set analysis in a higher education setting', *Journal of Service Management*, 29 (3): 422-442

Soria, K. and Stubblefield, R. (2015) 'Knowing me, knowing you: building strengths awareness, belonging and persistence in higher education', *Journal of College, Student Retention: Research, Theory and Practice*, 17 (3): 351-372

Theobald, K., Windsor, C., and Forster, E. (2018) 'Engaging students in a community of learning: renegotiating the learning environment', *Nurse Education in Practice,* 29: 137 – 142

Thomas, T. (2018) 'Implementing first-year assessment principles: an analysis of selected scholarly literature', *Student Success*, 9 (2): 25 – 38

Thomas, K. (2019) *Rethinking Student Belonging in Higher Education. From Bourdieu to Borderlands,* London: Routledge

Unlock (2018) 'University and College Admissions' retrieved from: http://www.unlock.org.uk/policy-issues/specific-policy-issues/universityadmissions/ (accessed October 2017)

Weale, S. (2018) 'UCAS drops need for university applications to declare convictions', *The Guardian*, 29 May, retrieved from: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/may/29/ucas-drops-need-for-university-applicants-to-declareconvictions (accessed July 2018)