

Co-Producing Learning Space in a Prison-University Partnership

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Abstract: This article explores a classroom co-produced by learners serving prison sentences, undergraduate criminology students and a pair of lecturer-facilitators. This space, in a high security prison for men serving life sentences ('HMP Lifer'), provides a good example of ethical praxis and moral sight working in combination to mitigate against moral and ethical blindness. It is a mechanism by which pedagogical concerns, and some human-centred ones, can be realised in an unconventional context. There are two areas to the discussion. Firstly, the effects of incorporating students from outside the prison into the classroom space, such as enhanced proximity, the reduction of prison learners' diffidence, motivation to appreciate the perspectives of others, and closing the pedagogical gap between participants. Secondly, enabling interaction that transforms the nature of the space, freeing it from institutional constraints. In doing this, the relational distance between participating individuals contracted, whilst simultaneously expanding the distance between them and their 'host' institutions. The approach allowed people to co-produce pedagogical capital, further enabling staff and students to 'see' each other and feel seen. This, together with the use of abstract questions and discussion, facilitated an understanding that knowledge is dispersed within the classroom, and may be disseminated beyond it. There is also evidence of effects beyond the classroom. Co-producing an educational space, inside an institution they were studying academically, became an opportunity for university students to experience learning differently to classes on campus. The approach rendered the space trustworthy and safe, in turn allowing the group to participate in potentially uncomfortable conversations, further enhancing their learning.

Keywords: Prison Education, Pedagogy, Co-production, Learning, Pedagogical capital

Introduction

This article focuses on the co-production of a space for learning in HMP Lifer, a high security prison for men sentenced to life imprisonment. Ten university students, ten prison learners, and a pair of lecturer-facilitators came together weekly in a prison classroom, over the course of eight weeks. Literature on co-production, students as producers of knowledge, critical pedagogy and conceptions of the prison boundary are first outlined, providing the conceptual framework. Methodological and ethical considerations are outlined before a discussion, organised into two parts. The first considers the effects of bringing learners from the community into prison, such as; proximity to other learners, appreciation of other people's perspectives, reducing the sense of diffidence amongst prison learners, positive effects extending beyond the classroom space, and lastly, the closing of pedagogical and social gaps between learners, and between learners and teacher-facilitators. The second explores how new forms of interaction emerged, freed from inherent institutional constraints.

The article concludes that an informal dialogic approach prioritising the use of abstract questions supported co-production in the space, providing an example of ethical praxis, underpinned by moral sight. It gave participants an opportunity to express themselves, and exercise a degree of agency about course content. It encouraged listening to the views of other people in a space rendered relatively comfortable, trustworthy and safe. The approach helped mitigate some of the barriers to learning, feeling like a learner and being recognised



as such. This co-produced, relational, participatory space mitigates against moral and ethical blindness and goes beyond functional aims of education. It prioritises learning about other people, their perspectives, their interests, the contexts that shape their lives and decisions.

Co-production

The origins of the co-production concept can be traced to the use of participatory methods in the fields of town and regional planning, and the provision of public services (Barker, 2010; Ostrom, 1990). However, in recent years in UK academia it has come to function as an umbrella term covering processes of knowledge production in far more diverse contexts. Co-production involves people working together to reduce barriers to trustworthiness, an antecedent of relationships built and sustained by trust (Colquitt, Scott and LePine, 2007). It implies working in ways that recognise the importance of ‘equal partnership for equal benefit’ (Johns, Flynn, Hall, Spivakovsky and Turner, 2022: 21). Its realisation in practice can be complicated by the context and the nature of power relations involved (SCIE, 2015); prisons have particular relational power dynamics in play (Mathiesen, 2005; Armstrong, 2020; Warr, 2020; Galloway, 2021). In particular, further to the inherent pains of involuntary, and indeterminate detention (Crewe, 2011), life-sentenced prisoners typically experience pervasive feelings of wariness and distrust that imbue all their interactions. This stems from feelings of uncertainty and insecurity generated by the presence of untrustworthy strangers, psychological threats in their environment and institutional surveillance. Relations with uniformed staff are particularly affected by this diffidence, but it is not confined to them. Interactions with institutional representatives with the power to affect everyday life, or influence decisions using written reports, such as adjudications and release dates, are also profoundly affected (Crewe et al, 2014).

Co-production is a relatively well-established concept in health and social care settings in the UK, but there is a question about the extent to which it is feasible in criminal justice settings (Johns et al, 2022), where presence within the institution itself is inherently involuntary (Trotter, 2015). However, recent research has highlighted how prisons are not one-dimensional institutions (Turner, 2016). This follows earlier recognition that even total institutions have exceptional places, where the norms of behaviour, display and emotional expression are different (Goffman, 1961). Such institutions potentially contain various internal geographies, spaces comprising different emotional zones (Crewe et al, 2014), in which different ways of being, and learning, are possible. Thus, there is the potential for creating space in which others can contribute, participate and lead.

Modern ideas about citizen participation evolved alongside the civil rights movements in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Arnstein’s well-known ‘ladder of citizen participation’ (1969) sought to shift understandings of the practice of ‘citizen power’ from the lowest forms of ‘tokenism’ to full citizen control. A guide to building active participation in prisons (Oglethorpe et al, 2019), produced following a two-year project by the Prisoners’ Education Trust with European partners, differentiates between prisoners as passive recipients of services and prisoners as active contributors. They identify five levels of active participation: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and devolving/empowering. These levels are presented visually as a pyramid, implying hierarchy, although the authors note that “the aim is not necessarily to reach the top of the pyramid” (2019: 7); not everyone has to reach the ‘higher’ levels. The elements contained in such ‘ladder’ models have also been summarised as ‘doing to, doing for, and doing with’, which shifts ‘power towards people’ (Slay and Stephens, 2013: 4), underpinned by forms of active participation (Johns et al, 2022: 23). In broad terms,

...co-production ideally involves working-making-doing together, disrupting power relations and traditional hierarchies, producing knowledge, and improving service provision through discussion with those who experience it. (Johns et al, 2022: 28).

Brosens (2019) highlights three forms of participation and involvement in prison life from the literature: participating in prison activities, democratic participation, and peer-based interventions. The current work fits within the first, broad, category. However, as discussed later, there is also an inherent peer component to the work. Recent years have seen the (re)-emergence of academic research on bringing university students

into prisons to facilitate participation in learning, both in the UK (Ludlow and Armstrong, 2016; King, Measham and O'Brien, 2019), and elsewhere (O'Connor, 2022). They highlight the importance of learner involvement in producing the learning experience.

Students as producers

The classroom pedagogy embraces the idea of the 'student as producer', which encourages the development of collaborative relations between student and academic for the production of knowledge (Neary and Winn, 2009). Inspired by von Humboldt's (1810) 'organic scholarship', it refers to praxis in which students are closely and directly engaged in exploratory thinking with tutors via Socratic dialogue. Students and facilitators alike are invited to work in communities with time for thinking, without practical obligations, nor restrictive assumptions about what will be learned. Relatedly, the pedagogic approach discussed here grew from the realisation that there was little purpose in delivering a fully pre-determined, fixed curriculum, recognising the potential for students to play a role in producing the experience (Neary and Winn, 2009; Neary, Saunders, Hagyard and Derricott, 2014; Galloway, 2021). Although increasingly detailed knowledge has been produced about 'what works' to reduce recidivism, less attention has been given to the insights and expertise of justice-involved people, their perspectives and experiences of the criminal justice system (Stout, Dalby and Schraner, 2017; Nichols, 2021).

A motivation in our pedagogical space was to minimise the epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007) and the hermeneutical marginalisation it leads to, characterised by uneven distribution of resources, such as concepts, credibility and knowledge (McKinnon, 2016). Epistemic injustice refers to the injustice suffered by individuals in their perceived capacity as knowers because of their social position and their association with a particular group (Fricker, 2007). It has been reconceptualised by Schmidt (2019) as a form of oppression experienced by a social group, not just individuals, according to their subordinated social position, and results in their marginalisation or exclusion from participation in epistemic activities. As Weaver helpfully summarises, when understood in this way, striving to facilitate epistemic justice "...necessarily focuses on facilitating epistemic participation" (2022: 19).

People in prison may experience a series of hostilities towards being, or becoming, recognised as learners, based on their prisoner status and/or being seen to belong to a particular societal group. The harm associated with this 'gentle invisible' form of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1977: 192) is often unrecognised, operating as a hidden form of power. It is described through 'doxa', or what Bourdieu and Wacquant refer to as 'unquestioned shared beliefs which constitute fields that explain which beliefs, truths, practices and relations' (1992: 108) are considered appropriate and normalised. Further, it is well documented that people in prison are disproportionately likely to come from racially and ethnically minoritized groups, and experience imprisonment differently to white prisoners (Lammy, 2017; Young, 2014). In a chapter reflecting on what makes a good prison officer, Whyte describes how prison officers communicated their resentment towards him, a (Black) prisoner with access to educational opportunities, something they seemed to feel he did not deserve (Brierley, 2023). Thus, epistemic injustice and symbolic violence are experienced unevenly across the prison estate by different individuals according to their personal characteristics and their interactions within the carceral context (HMIP, 2022).

Critical pedagogy and co-production

Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) called for an active engagement with oppressed and exploited groups (Duncan-Andrade and Morrell, 2008), such as people in prison (Kilgore, 2011). This 'critical pedagogy' challenges the social, environmental, and economic structures and social relations that shape the conditions in which people live, and in which educational institutions operate. In dialogic education favoured by critical pedagogy, teachers seek to facilitate reciprocal conversations and debates. Multiple perspectives on economic, political, and social situations are introduced and valued, including students' experiences and indigenous ways of knowing (Moll, Amanti, Neff, and Gonzalez, 2006). In so doing, the teacher should not eliminate the voice of any student.

Further, liberatory emancipation seeks to dissolve the teacher/student distinction. Essentially, teachers

set conditions in which they become teacher-students and students, in turn, are student-teachers. In this context, the phrase “student-teacher” is not used in the sense of a teacher-training programme, but rather to convey the idea that the students are now recognised as co-producers of knowledge (Kirylo, Thirumurthy, Smith, and McLaren, 2010), deriving from their life experiences. Relatedly, the pedagogy in our classroom, characterised by the use of abstract questions and discussion, was designed to invite contributions and encourage active listening, to make this a more inclusive space (Little and Warr, 2022).

The classroom space at the prison boundary

In seeking to create a comfortable, safe learning space in prison, it is appropriate for teacher-facilitators to consider what it might mean to learn as an adult faced with the prospect of being incarcerated for the next ten, twenty, thirty years (Little and Warr, 2022). In other words, to consider learners’ perspectives, not just the teaching perspective; an element of ethical praxis. Effects for people sentenced to life imprisonment have been documented, including multiple and varied ‘pains’ of imprisonment (for example, uncertainty, indeterminacy, psychological assessment, self-government, of depth, weight and tightness; Crewe, 2011) and associated forms of emotional self-preservation (Crewe, 2024). Herrity senses the “ontological arrhythmia between reality and possibility” (2024:21) imposed on the imprisoned self, which sits uneasily with possible scenarios of freedom, with family. The idea that imprisonment creates time that does not matter, spaces of ‘non-life’, has also been found (Ievins, 2024).

To have some hope of achieving a space conducive to learning in such circumstances requires ethical praxis underpinned by moral sight (Little, 2023). A degree of co-production is implied in creating such a space, for there is no one fixed answer to this question. Further, adults do not tend to engage in learning as a result of compulsion (O’Grady, 2008). Instead, they are thought to have more intrinsic motivations, such as wanting to improve their knowledge and understanding about the world around them (Knowles, 1984). In the case of people incarcerated for long periods, this may also include motivations relating to their potential future lives on the outside (Flynn and Higdon, 2022).

Numerous practical barriers to education in prison have been identified including access to books, materials and technologies to facilitate learning, opportunities to learn during evenings and weekends, a wider range of courses, and equal wages with employment roles (Taylor, 2014). The House of Commons (2022) Education Select Committee found a series of practical and cultural barriers to prisoners’ education in prison, such as prison estate infrastructure, with spaces not designed appropriately to support educational and classroom-based activities; daily timetables working against effective education; insufficient levels of (education) staff, partly due to poor retention; inadequate resourcing and investment of human and digital infrastructure, and practices such as transferring prisons without taking sufficient account of pre-existing educational commitments, such as courses or exams. These barriers in turn impact on the way that people in prison feel valued (or not) as learners, a phenomenon re-visited in discussion.

The boundary between prison and the outside world is considerably more porous than typically presented, and commonly supposed (Turner, 2016). This porousness is facilitated by, for example, the ubiquity of mobile technologies, and also complex bundles of cultural, economic and political relations, including those involving the corruption of staff (Goldsmith, 2020; The Guardian, 2018). Such relations undermine simplistic distinctions between the “carceral inside” and the “public outside”, and demands renewed attention on the processes that create a sense of place in the arguably ‘placeless’ prison (Cohen 2011, cited by Turner, 2016). A social space is the product of social relations dominant at the time of production (Lefebvre, 2014). Space is therefore neither fixed or absolute; it has endless potential. Yet space is neither limitless nor entirely flexible; spatial ideas need to be materialised in real time and real space, by people (Harvey, 2000). Our classroom space was produced in partnership by the people present in the space.

Methodology

This section outlines the pedagogical approach in the classroom space, the data collected and its thematic analysis, my position as a practitioner-researcher, and practical and ethical considerations.

Pedagogical approach

Through dialogue, students were encouraged to shape the sessions. To facilitate this, we (a pair of lecturer-facilitators) did not impose learning outcomes, which contain power-laden assumptions about what should be learnt (Hussey and Smith, 2002). There is a risk that such procedures and practice come to dominate the learning experience with ‘criteria compliance’ dominating learning (Torrance, 2007). For teachers, bringing about learning is a key task, but to control the learning taking place is theoretically impossible. Teachers are (only) able to guide studying within the ‘teaching-studying-learning’ process (Kansanen 2003: 230, cited by Buckley, 2021).

A degree of freedom to choose topics encouraged students to express points they decided were pertinent to the development of their discussion. This helps to alter the power relations in the classroom, and share dialogic power with prison students (Smith, 2013). It also makes intuitive sense for the context; we are not seeking to determine what people will learn from the interactions in the classroom. The approach seeks to counteract what Ball (2009) has described as academic staff operating as ‘public sector technicians’ increasingly alienated from students, losing creative control over what is taught, and the manner of its teaching.

The sessions themselves were characterised by using an abstract question to help generate discussion based on a weekly reading. For example, following the introductory session, subsequent sessions focused on questions such as *What is knowledge? What is agnotology? How are prisons represented in media? Why do we punish? How does racism affect the criminal justice system? What is white privilege? What is rehabilitation?* The latter two sessions were designed after asking the group to choose the topic to focus on.

The focus on co-production suggests a participatory relational approach, drawing on participatory action research, which privileges the collective production of knowledge in the midst of ‘action’ (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014). This may be undertaken through the formation of a ‘community of practice’ (Hart et al., 2013) or, more pertinently here, a space of ‘dialogic co-inquiry’ (Banks et al., 2014), in which measures are introduced to mitigate the (often invisible) hierarchies between academic and non-academic partners.

Before beginning the study, DMU student participation was approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, and permission to interview prison participants was provided by the prison governor. The project was commissioned by the prison as it supported their HMPPS business priorities and the evaluation upon which this article is based was an integral part of that commissioned project. Therefore, as per NRC guidelines, approval was received from the Governor, the prison’s Head of Learning and Skills, and the Faculty Research and Ethics Committee at DMU. Interview participants gave their consent for feedback and reflections to be included in subsequent publications. The methodology is an example of ‘participatory evaluative research’; as well as acting as a facilitator of the classroom context, I was a participant within it (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). The research is evaluative because as a researcher, I am in a position to frame, code and interpret the data that results (Cousins and Earl, 1992). I was a participant in dialogue, researching the context, and this places me in a unique position as a participatory evaluative researcher (Carlen, 2020; Flyvbjerg, Landman and Schram, 2012). The researcher thus experiences the classroom as an active participant within it. This has benefits, such as requiring me to be embedded in the activity under investigation and becoming sensitised to the experience of those whose perspectives I sought to represent. This is a valuable means for developing empathy and research skills (Probst, 2016). There are challenges for this dual position; the facilitator role requires cognitive and emotional energy to both be part of a context and seeking to understand its operation from different perspectives. It also requires a commitment to represent the contributions by participants faithfully.

There are four main sources of data for recording and representing the pedagogical context. Firstly, discussions reflecting on each session. Secondly, written reflective pieces by the prison and university student participants submitted voluntarily towards the end of the course. Thirdly, reflective feedback sheets completed by nearly all participants at the end of the course. Fourthly, semi-structured interviews¹ with a total of twenty interviewees were undertaken approximately two months after the eight-week course ended, comprising ten HMP Lifer students², and ten university students. Subsequent quotations from participants tend to be from the recorded interviews. If from a reflective written piece, this is indicated following the quotation.

A hybrid narrative-thematic form of analysis was applied to the data generated by the reflections and feedback. Thematic analysis is “a method for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 6). Narrative analysis refers to the analysis of the stories that people tell about their lives and their experiences (Sandberg and Ugelvik, 2016). Narrative is one of the most frequently occurring and ubiquitous forms of discourse (Cortazzi, 1994), helping individuals to make sense of their own lives and explain them to others. Significantly, we are not just passive consumers of stories; we interact with them and they act on us (Sandberg and Ugelvik, 2016). Indeed, the work discussed here is underpinned by the realisation that these are “...shaped mostly by interpersonal encounters, or our moral environment” (Liebling, 2021: 110). Early analysis of interviews and written reflections revealed a strong common theme to be how comfortable, at ease, people felt in the classroom space. This is reflected in the subsequent discussion of findings.

Practitioner-researcher position

Working collaboratively to produce this learning space in prison became the most rewarding teaching experience of my career to date. By this stage, I had a range of experiences of teaching and training in higher education and professional spheres. My unique position as a facilitator-researcher helped ‘tune in’ to the ‘emotional ecology’ (Zembylas, 2007) of the classroom as a distinct ‘emotional zone’ (Crewe et al 2014), offering a lens through which I could interpret discussion amongst the group. Following each session, we, as teacher-facilitators, discussed our reflections on the ‘sensory feel’ (Herrity et al, 2021) of the classroom, in relation to the quality and quantity of discussion, the strength of the responses elicited and the emotional (dis) comfort of participants. A number of personal characteristics undoubtedly influence my perspectives on prison life, including my age, gender, social class, ethnicity, and time spent in and around prisons over a period of 25 years, as well as how people respond to these characteristics. The habitus (Bourdieu, 1990) of the prison educator was, to some extent, unfamiliar to me. However, I had prior experience of developing a course in the same prison, and other courses in a nearby ‘resettlement’ prison.

One of the most important aspects to preparatory work as a teacher-facilitator in prison was understanding the particular context. This developed over a period of many years beginning with research in a Young Offenders Institution in the late 1990s. A year later, I participated in debates with prisoners as part of an ad hoc programme of connection between the university of my postgraduate study and HMP Lifer. University colleagues who worked with me to co-facilitate this classroom space also brought with them their own experiences of prison. Understanding was built over years through an iterative process of reading, research, discussions, practical experience and immersion in the field of prison reform organisations, including attendance at events on prison-related topics, speaking with prison staff and people subject to prison sentences.

On being invited into the prison by the Governor, I risked becoming part of the institutional infrastructure, or being seen to be part of it, particularly by prison students. As Sim (1990) argues, professional presence in institutions is a direct consequence of a growing disciplinary infrastructure. Sim notes the risk of seeing people in prison as a homogeneous ‘offender’ category, denying the reality of individual experiences. I was determined not to replicate, nor fall into, this way of working. My awareness of it, and the focus on creating a learning space, involving students from beyond the prison walls and culture, helped to enhance my own ‘sight’, reducing the likelihood of moral blindness, mitigating some of these risks. I too was keen to minimise my ‘lecturer’ status with prisoners, instead preferring a role that is closer to that of a facilitator. More significantly, I was pleased not to be carrying keys to prison doors, in case this gave prison learners the impression that I was connected with the disciplinary apparatus of the institution, which I was not (Crewe et al, 2014). This also relates to practical and ethical considerations for me in the classroom space.

Practical and ethical considerations

This work involved an array of practical challenges. For example, travelling to, and entering, the prison involved finding a mutually convenient period in the timetable of the two institutions and its learners. For this reason alone, institutional approval or ‘buy-in’ from senior managers is necessary; it is unusual to be able to disrupt, or adapt, institutional routines. For prison learners we had to be mindful of certain work or exam commitments, visit times for family, friends and legal representatives, and finding a suitable available classroom space. Our third-year university students, volunteering for this experience, also had timetabled lectures,

seminars and dissertation supervision meetings. Some also had work commitments outside of university. The voluntary nature of the endeavour helped minimise some potential bureaucratic barriers.

There are important ethical considerations when undertaking work of this nature. Attendance in the classroom was voluntary for students. Likewise, all participants were invited to give signed consent before engaging in recorded interviews. One prison student did not consent to interview and it did not proceed, despite a peer offering to accompany them for moral support. Whilst disappointing from a research perspective, the refusal demonstrated the voluntary nature of participation; there were no consequences for non-participation. Obtaining true informed consent from people in prison can be challenging, given the actual, and presumed, power imbalances (Wener, 2007). It is also essential for researchers not to manipulate or extend conditions that may be harmful (Fisher and Anushko, 2008). Interviewees were not offered a reward or incentive for participation and thus non-participation was not associated with reward withdrawal. This helped distance the pedagogy and the associated research from systems of reward and punishment, the omnipotent, omnipresent disciplinary apparatus of the prison institution (Drake, 2012; Warr, 2020). Once in the prison classroom, we had flexibility and autonomy over what was discussed, how and when. A non-uniformed member of education staff was present for each of the sessions. This meant that a member of prison staff was present, but that they did not carry the same symbolic disciplinary potential of a uniformed member of staff (Crewe et al, 2014). Diffidence has been found to reduce in parts of the prison system which are less ‘deep’ (King and McDermott, 1995), where non-custodial personnel and glimpses of the outside world are found.

Discussion of findings

The following discussion is organised in two parts. The first considers the effects of bringing learners from the community into prison, such as; greater proximity to other learners, enhanced appreciation of other people’s perspectives, reducing the sense of diffidence amongst prison learners, effects extending beyond the classroom space, and the reduction of pedagogical, and social, gaps between people. The second explores the creation of a learning space in which new forms of interaction emerged, relatively freed from institutional constraints. Names for contributors of quoted material are pseudonyms.

Bringing university students into prison

In the prison context, co-production can be a helpful idea for creating, or modifying, an educational space, mitigating some aspects of the institutional experience which create or reinforce barriers to education and learning. Co-production provides a mechanism by which pedagogical concerns, and some humanistic ones, can be understood so as to reduce such barriers. Participants experienced the classroom as a space they felt sufficiently comfortable to share perspectives, opinions and stories without fear of judgement. Bringing students from outside the prison had a number of interrelated effects. Without exception, participants reported a positive effect on the classroom dynamic. For one prison learner it was significant because:

...in the prison it’s...stuck in...prison life...and then the narrative becomes prison. You want to break away from that and go towards more of an academic, professional, university, higher up level where you engage, you think differently...eventually you’re going to go outside, you’re not going to be in prison (Diaz, HMP Lifer learner).

Diaz here explains how divorcing the pedagogy from the prison helped ‘deinstitutionalise’ the space, making it more aspirational. The latter part of the quote connects with Flynn and Higdon’s (2022) argument that education in prison should focus on knowledge of (re)integration for a successful life, beyond prison, within the community. Relatedly, Laeon described how the students from outside the prison helped him feel comfortable, offering an opportunity to get a sense of his own pedagogical and social situation:

...with someone from the outside you are able to be more relaxed...you can gauge where you are as well in life and where you are now. Because when you are in prison you are lost, you are not part of the calendar, you are not part of events happening outside. And a lot of times you don’t know...what the real opinions are...You only go with what you are fed by the media (Laeon, HMP Lifer learner).

Other prison learners also described this as a rare opportunity to learn about what is happening, out there, in the ‘real world’. Their typical human encounters are with people paid to do a job, lock them up, or also serving a long sentence. Their restricted interactions mean that the thoughts and feelings of other people, real people, from the technologically enhanced faster-paced world of infinite interactions, have particular value. Over time, people in prison thus express an increasing sense of isolation, a disconnection from what is going on ‘out there’, and how they should think or feel about it. Retrieving a part of themselves can feel elusive. Laeon further captures the significance of outsiders entering prison space:

When someone from the outside comes it's like you are two different worlds, so you think that you know a lot "I am up-to-date, I listen to the radio and the TV", but it's just a false sense of knowledge...when you talk to people that are in the know you get the real perspective of things, how it really is outside, what has been happening...talking to university students...it broadens your own horizons (Laeon, HMP Lifer).

Prison learners were aware of missing out on educational possibilities. Oz, in prison for almost a decade, described how this experience provided a taste of something he had previously missed:

I wanted to see what it's like, to experience people that actually are at uni, get their perspective on it, see how it is. Because I really kind of missed that out... I didn't get a chance to go uni or even college to an extent...So this was my kind of chance to kind of interact with people that are there (Oz, HMP Lifer).

Classroom participants valued being paired with a person from the partner institution, for an early opportunity to introduce themselves. Each person in a pair was invited to introduce the other, say something about their motivations for joining the course and describe a time when learning had felt good for them, which “...was really good to see what people’s initial interests were” (Chloe, DMU student). This opened the dialogic space and connected with a following question about the focus of our sessions, which “...allowed us to have some input in what we were actually going to learn about” (Alanis, DMU student). This had a symbolic and practical effect on the group and how they perceived the experience. Participants quickly sensed this to be different to their normal experiences of educational spaces. A sense of ownership, some decision-making power, a degree of autonomy, was significant...

...giving people some part of it, is almost like you are giving them a percentage of the shares, ownership...we are all in this together; it's all about us and we have all got a stake in it. And it gives you that confidence and openness to now be a bit more involved and talk a lot more... And then everyone is able to learn so much more than they could have learnt. So...you had some subjects like three or four that you said this is what we are going to talk about, and the other ones it's up to you guys (Laeon, HMP Lifer).

Understanding our motivation to consider the group interests, rather than impose a fully formed course, communicated something of our regard for their perspective as individual adults with life experience. This contrasted with the lack of pedagogical power generally available to prison learners:

...we haven't got a voice in jail, let's be honest. We get told what to do...But...like me telling you all of this, it's like I'm telling someone from outside. Maybe you can share this with your students. Because we don't get a chance to talk to people from outside, people who are genuine. Like if I'm talking to an officer like this, I'm thinking what's his agenda, why is he doing this, oh is he going to write, do you know what I'm saying, he's going to try and do something dodgy (Oz, HMP Lifer).

This space became a zone in which the prison learners felt able to switch off somewhat from the usual concerns about monitoring, surveillance and potential manipulation. The presence of people who do not

operate according to the same institutional logics was significant in fostering a sense of trust. On being asked why he did not trust staff in prison, Laeon stated:

Because anything you say to them, they write it down, you can't be yourself. You don't trust the prison officers, you don't trust the government, full-stop. So, when students are coming in they are not part of the government, they are students...you can talk to them...You are a lecturer, you are not part of this establishment...So we can sit down and have a conversation and ask for your opinions...we can talk to you freely... (Laeon, HMP Lifer).

Such diffidence is less intense in less 'deep' parts of the prison (see King and McDermott, 1995) where one is more likely to find non-custodial personnel and glimpses of the outside world. Certain locations, 'third spaces' (Wilson, 2003, 2004) discursively positioned 'between prison and the outside world' (Wilson, 2003: 294), may sit culturally apart from the wider institution. Spaces such as visiting rooms and the chapel cross public-private boundaries, permitting prisoners' external emotional lives or bringing out their private perspectives (Comfort, 2008; Moran, 2013). Here, people find themselves in a liminal space between the worlds of prison and wider society. In such a space, the normal social rules of each world are temporarily suspended. Crewe et al (2014) suggest that educational spaces in prison can operate as such a liminal, or third, space. They propose a distinct 'emotional geography' of prison, with zones in which certain kinds of emotional displays are more or less possible. For example, kindness, vulnerability, or expressions of doubt about oneself or one's knowledge. They thus challenge ideas and representations of prisons as emotionally one-dimensional environments, where only 'hypermasculine' displays of emotion are possible. Here, space is understood as a site of power, with possibilities for curiosity, negotiation, and counter-conduct. Our classroom space constituted a part of the institution's spatial network, the 'prison boundary patchwork' (Turner, 2016) of interaction between life inside and beyond the prison boundary. This new liminal space facilitated interactions between the university students from outside the prison with the learners inside it, together with a pair of lecturer-facilitators.

People entering from outside bring forms of 'ordinary discourse', whereas interactions with officers tend to be more superficial (Crewe et al, 2014: 69). Therefore, the normal rules of interaction with authority could be temporarily put aside. Bringing in university students, who are not part of the institution and its disciplinary systems, enabled the classroom to become such a novel spatial zone, working to mitigate differences. Yet the experience also brought with it a potential threat of exposing prison learners to feelings of pedagogic discomfort such as 'being stupid', not 'keeping up' or not 'holding my own' in discussions and debates (Dave, written reflection, HMP Lifer). Such feelings were mitigated by lecturer-facilitators using abstract questions (Little and Warr, 2022), valuing responses and working to create a non-judgemental space. Educational study can be liberating if it enthusiastically embraces counter-productivity concepts such as stupidity (Agamben 1985), unprofessionalism (Arsenjuk and Koerner 2009) and uselessness (Lewis 2014, 2014a); this views study as "self-nourishment of the soul" (Agamben 1985: 65) rather than instrumentalist education.

The experience offered prison participants a rare chance to renew their acquaintance with learning in a space that allowed a degree of flexibility, discursive freedom and permission not to know things:

Everyone's started afresh...just open to just listening to everyone's ideas and respecting everyone's ideas (HP, HMP Lifer).

As a result, new connections formed between people in the space:

"It's that rapport you build" (Diaz, HMP Lifer).

The impact has been amazing, because...people on the course...I didn't really know them, but after the course I have known them...what they think of life...their perspectives on life and have debates with them and sit and have conversations. We don't really do that in the prison (Laeon, HMP Lifer).

There was evidence of this effect 'spilling over' beyond the session (Crawley, 2004). For the prison students, this manifested itself in three main ways; the conversations it promoted with other prisoners; the

conversations it promoted with other prisoners; the conversations they could have with family and friends, and with new acquaintances. For example...

...every Thursday morning when I come back to the wing after [the session] everyone normally asks, "oh, what did you do today". And if I didn't see them they would definitely ask me in the evening like...week in, and week out (Rhys, HMP Lifer).

This provided new ways of connecting with people around the prison:

...even certain prisoners, after the course I got closer to them as well...so even people that you see now you say 'hello', 'what's going on', 'alright'. After that, it broadened like relationships with other people because it was good to see their views and how they are... you look at people differently. Like "I never knew you thought like that, you're interesting". So, you find a lot more people interesting (HP, HMP Lifer).

Following the course, HP described speaking with a prisoner that he 'definitely' would not have spoken with before. Mason movingly recalled a phone conversation with his wife, how she was pleased to be able to understand him much better on the phone. Prone to mumbling when he spoke, over the duration of the course he became considerably clearer, more confident in his expression. I too had noticed this, and his account provided corroboration.

Research on classroom spaces in prison has tended to focus on the effects for prison-based students. This is understandable, for even though there have been many prison-university partnerships over the years, the presence of university students in prison is still relatively unusual. However, it became apparent that the learning space in HMP Lifer felt safe for university students too (Little, 2023). The pedagogy was designed to divorce the topic of conversation from the immediate circumstances of long-term incarceration (Crewe, Hulle and Wright, 2020). The university students, with less experience of life in general and prison in particular, were still able to participate by active listening (Rogers, 1969) and by exchanging their own perspectives and interpretations. They reported learning differently about their subject relative to its presentation on campus. University students also described their perspectives, and their relationships, shifting as a result of the experience. The social distance between learners reduced, enhancing a sense of proximity, with effects beyond the immediate space:

...this course has really opened not only my eyes, but my families and friends eyes. A lot of people I spoke to were telling me that I was crazy and these people were dangerous, but when I spoke to them after the course and explained how much I was enjoying it and how respectful and nice the [HMP Lifer] students were, my father actually apologized for assuming and said he was sorry he had de-humanized these students, which was really touching for me as I did not expect this from him! (Lizzy, DMU student).

The proximal distance (Simmel, 1908) between participants on the course reduced, and they described a sense of comfort with each other. University students also began to see their lecturers as 'more human', less alien. For example, after the voice recorder was switched off, a student commented how they had benefitted from getting to know lecturers as people. Speaking with us off campus, they received snippets of our personal lives interwoven with our discourse, relative to a more distant professional relationship in a lecture theatre. When students feel that staff are disclosing something of themselves, going beyond what they need to, this can inspire trust. This resonates with pockets of 'genuine/thick' trust amongst incarcerated women in an open prison, where staff relationships or actions were perceived to operate beyond the prison regime and be motivated by care and empathy (Waite, 2022).

On returning to the lecture theatre, university students reported changing where they sat, reflecting their new social bonds. Relations amongst the group helped 'de-institutionalise' the space...

I never felt like I was sat in a prison and that really surprised me. I thought I was going to be really anxious...once you actually strip it all back and you realise that you are just students

and you are just all learning...you are all equal at that point...I never thought that I would feel that way (Lizzy, DMU student).

Greater proximity and a sense of familiarity forged a connection between the participants living in very different circumstances. Our shared use of the space simultaneously collapsed the distance between individual participants (Simmel, 1908), whilst growing the distance between the institutions we ‘belonged’ to. The university students also benefitted from less clearly delineated student-teacher relationships.

...we all felt so comfortable and I think it was because we were all able to speak on like equal levels as well (Alanis, DMU student, 2019).

This was a different way of thinking and learning for the students, liberating the conversation so that it could be taken in different directions, creating a novel space.

Creating a novel learning space

Secondly, as noted above, interactions emerged in the space, relatively freed from the usual institutional constraints. People described feeling comfortable, challenged pedagogically, yet not judged:

...at first I thought it was going to be awkward, but once you got in...then you like just engage in conversation ...So I feel like that kind of helps just get comfortable as well (Toni, DMU student).

As lecturer-facilitators we also enjoyed the experience, relatively freed from institutional technocratic and bureaucratic demands that have mushroomed in recent times. This enhances the moral sight of teacher-facilitators, enabling us to spend more effort recognising the needs of people in the space. This is significant because findings from student engagement research provide compelling evidence that engaging students also requires institutions to engage with staff (Krause and Armitage, 2014). Hooks describes entering the classroom of a big city university that felt like entering a prison, a closed down space where it was difficult to create a positive context for learning (2003: 13). Here we entered a prison, with the paradoxical effect that our teaching was freed from pedagogical constraints inherent in contemporary higher education. Our prison group was comparatively small, everyone knew each other’s (first) name, the same people were present each week, and people attended the whole course³. Group size is a relevant factor here, having been found to be significant in group interaction (Simmel, 1908). Different patterns of interaction have been found in differently sized groups and these ‘...tend to result in less satisfaction with the participation and less consensus as group size is increased’ (Hare, 1952: 261). Bringing learners together in a physical space, even in prisons, was becoming somewhat normalised at the time. However, when the Covid-19 pandemic struck, the associated lockdowns led to “a great discrepancy between face-to-face and online interactivity and participation” for one prison-university partnership (Scalpello, 2023: 11) taking “student engagement and motivation along with it”.

Here, by contrast, final year undergraduate criminology students experienced a form of pedagogy where they played a key role in curating a learning space inside an institution they were studying academically.

...It’s really quite good because it takes you out of the lecture and seminar style of learning... it was really quite good to be put in a different environment where...we were all just having a conversation... there was no barriers and I quite liked that (Chloe, DMU student).

There is some tension between education and security concerns in prison (O’Donnell, 2016). Restricting access to education contributes to dissatisfaction and frustration amongst prisoners; thus a meaningful educational offer in prison may enhance an institution’s safety (Duguid, 2000; Langelid et al, 2021). Disciplinary concerns and rigidity had filtered through to HMP Lifer’s education department, which prison learners reported as limited and stifling:

...everything’s ran like a prison, however education for me doesn’t necessarily work like that...when you learn you have to be comfortable, you have to feel relaxed, you have to feel you want to engage and that’s when you take things in. If you’re constantly being told what to do or monitored, or it’s regimented, you just switch off basically, which a lot of the guys do. This was a unique opportunity where people were able to feel comfortable and engage like

students outside would in a university or a study group setting, like in tutorials or seminars or something like that. I think it worked really well (Rhys, HMP Lifer).

The pedagogical approach adhered to the principle that everyone had something of worth to contribute, which facilitated a sense of trust, safety and comfort in the space. This contrasted with prison learners' recent experiences of education:

There was trust always in this group and everyone was valued the same and everyone was comfortable. But in education you are not, you weren't ever deemed as the same...that freedom and that general trust is not there which is sad. I think that's why a lot of people don't go up there because they don't want to be treated like that (Rhys, HMP Lifer).

Learners feeling sufficiently comfortable to contribute and share ideas helped encourage others:

...a lot of the things the people I was paired up with were saying I was thinking, but hadn't said out loud. And when I realised they were thinking similar things as I was, if they're thinking similar things why not tell the whole group what we're both thinking...I think that was a nice part as well about there being a lot of different ethnicities on the [HMP Lifer] side as well because it was like you felt more comfortable to say what you had to say no matter what side it was on kind of thing because there was a bit of a mix (Misha, DMU).

This student identifying as mixed heritage found the ethnic diversity amongst participants a welcome part of the course experience, contributing to her sense of safety. Growing up in a mainly white environment with predominantly white friends, she reported rarely having had the opportunity to refer to her heritage in a way that felt meaningful. In combination with the pedagogical approach, the diversity in the room⁴ made a difference for her. She reported connecting with other learners on the course, and also changing her ambitions:

it's beneficial in terms of...my learning and then the people around me are learning... because it's changed my ambitions. And I'd say it's beneficial because it seems...like everyone involved has had a positive experience and it has helped them in a way, whether that's just to see that they're not as different as they think they are, or they're not as alienated as they think they are, or that they should go back and do more studying (Misha, DMU).

Participants felt encouraged to speak. One of the most nervous university students prior to the course reported gaining from it:

[It]...makes you more confident speaking in front of people that you don't know...[it] was something I was scared to do but would do it a hundred times over, because it's something that you can't get anywhere else. So, it's worth doing, like you could be the most shy person in the world, but to do this, it will change who you are in a way (Alanis, DMU student).

Relatedly, Weaver finds that "...rather than focusing principally on their outcomes, the value of, and rationale for co-productive approaches may be more normative than instrumental". Their success thus depends on the extent to which they can generate opportunities for epistemic participation by allowing "...interdependent actors to forge new norms of interaction, new forms of knowing, and new ways of being and doing" (2022: 18). This is consistent with Gray et al (2019), who argue that prison and university partnerships should be characterised by an appreciation that 'how' teaching is undertaken is as important as 'what' is taught. A priority is thus to consider how to develop the collaborative relations inherent to the 'student as producer' model, introduced earlier.

In Bovill and Bulley's (2011) adaptation of Arnstein's (1969) model of citizenship participation in relation to curriculum design, students take the place of citizens. The lowest two rungs of the ladder show tutors taking

taking full control of the learning, with the highest rung giving total control to the students. A co-produced, or co-created, curriculum is placed on the seventh (of eight) rung, dubbed ‘partnership – a negotiated curriculum’. This entails students and lecturers/tutors working together. So, whilst students do not have full control of the curriculum (as with the eighth, and final, rung), they still have control of the decision making, with substantial influence on their learning. There are two related points here. Firstly, whilst it is conceptually helpful to consider different types and levels of participation (and avoid tokenistic methods of inclusion), the extent to which one might judge co-production to be happening, or not, rather depends on the context, and how participants think and feel. Arguably, all five levels of participation referred to by Oglethorpe et al (2019) were present at one point or another in the current course.

Secondly, the notion of students having control, raises questions about perceptions of power in the space, and about the extent to which ‘full’ control is possible, or desirable, for students in this prison context. As Campbell et al (2019) note, in relation to running workshops as social work professionals, the very act of ‘inviting’ others to apply to join the space is in itself an expression of power. A Foucauldian understanding of ‘power as relational’ (Gilbert and Powell, 2010; Pease, 2002) recognises that the pursuit of providing opportunities for education and learning could exacerbate power imbalances and operate as a form of disciplinary technology. A prior awareness of this informed our desire to distance the work from processes and people in occupational roles associated with institutional discipline and punishment.

With reference to Johns’s quote earlier, co-production “...involves **working-making-doing** together, disrupting power relations and traditional hierarchies, producing knowledge, and improving service provision **through discussion with those who experience it** (Johns et al, 2022: 28, emphasis added). At the heart of the approach is that life experiences influence the way we sense the world around us, and thus our knowledge and understanding of it, together with our perceptions of power to engage with it. Here, it is clear that participants welcomed the power-sharing, particularly as it contrasted with their limited, or infantilising, prior educational experiences. Prison students reported feeling recognised as learners in the space, as people treated with dignity, enabled to participate in educational discussions in ways that were not generally available to them. They felt seen, by people from the outside, which enabled them to see themselves as learners and able to contribute to the education of others (Little, 2023).

Sharing a classroom space with people serving long prison sentences also enhanced the pedagogical capital of university students. It allowed these students to ‘see’ each other (Benjamin, 1915, cited by Buck-Morss, 1991), and for students and teachers to ‘see’ each other too. This fosters an appreciation that knowledge is dispersed within the classroom and can be disseminated beyond it.

Concluding comments

This article explains how small, yet significant, shifts in the pedagogical approach enabled the co-production of a learning space shared between university students, lecturer-facilitators and prison learners. An informal dialogic approach prioritising the use of abstract questions provides an example of ethical praxis, underpinned by moral sight. It gave participants an opportunity to express themselves, and exercise a degree of agency about course content and the direction of discussion. It encouraged listening to the views of other people in a space rendered relatively trustworthy and safe. The approach helped mitigate some of the barriers to learning, feeling like a learner and being recognised as such. Involving outsiders, from beyond the prison’s disciplinary infrastructure, contributed to the sense of safety amongst prison learners.

Co-production can mitigate against moral and ethical blindness and goes beyond functional aims of education. It prioritises learning about other people, their perspectives, their interests, the contexts that shape their lives and decisions. Co-production here encouraged responses to abstract questions, developing skills as active listeners, in a non-judgemental manner. Initial openness and flexibility affected the way learners saw the space, expanding the pedagogical possibilities. As Laeon commented; giving over some of the ‘dialogic shares’, the conversational ownership, had an important symbolic and practical effect. A benefit of the experience was changing the nature of the conversations that participants felt able to engage in.

Co-production can be understood as a method which both attends to, and works against, dominant inequalities. It might be positioned ‘within, against, and beyond’ current configurations of power in academia

and society more broadly (Bell and Pahl, 2018). Whilst invited into the prison as lecturer-facilitators to share expertise in teaching and learning, the learning process was not merely one-way. This research strongly suggests benefits for university students moving beyond the campus to learn more holistically about people, institutions and systems they are studying as part of their degrees. Such findings resonate with Harper's (2011) argument for rethinking the status of learning that emerges from outside the formal curriculum, together with an appreciation of the potential effects of a more expansive vision of education.

Students reported learning a lot, impacting positively on their confidence, relationships, and ambitions. Where they could not directly contribute to a discussion based on their own personal life experience, they made important contributions to dialogue through active listening. Engaging meaningfully in conversation enhanced the proximity between participants, simultaneously distancing them from the institutional logics, cultures and practices that serve to constrain educational possibilities. This helped produce a trustworthy learning space, in what is typically considered a low-trust context. As lecturer-facilitators, relatively free from institutional constraints, this became our most enjoyable and rewarding pedagogical experience. Working collaboratively as a pair also helped us sense the contributions of participants in the space.

There are implications for how we think about co-production and work with students – whether in prison or universities – in activities and processes of learning. Co-production has an important role to play in rethinking and remaking learning spaces. It helps tease out forms of knowledge within communities that are often overlooked or undervalued (Arday et al, 2021; Herrity et al, 2021; Ravetz and Ravetz, 2016). These forms of knowledge are often produced and privileged by marginalised and oppressed subject positions (Bhopal and Preston, 2012). In seeking to re-imagine inclusive pedagogy within the academy, Arday et al (2021) uncover a series of micro-aggressions within it. In particular, they consider the impact of a narrow and restrictive curriculum on students and staff from minoritized ethnic communities. For example, they found the omission of diverse histories and multi-cultural knowledge canons facilitates cultures of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion. This pedagogical approach recognises this gap and seeks to reduce it. The focus here has been on the prison context, and yet there are potentially implications for higher education more broadly.

The recent 'turn' to co-production in UK academia offers possibilities for academics and communities interested in working together to further social justice aims (Facer and Enright, 2016). However, there are potential 'dark sides' to co-production, such as minimising government responsibility, particularly at a time of resource scarcity; a lack of clear responsibilities between services provided by private, public and voluntary and community sectors; precarious services in which it is unclear who would be responsible for failure; threats to democracy or democratic processes; reinforcement of unequal power positions, and co-destruction of public value (Steen, Brandsen and Verschuere, 2018). These are potentially grave issues, and should not be quickly dismissed. They are somewhat 'higher-level' concerns than the focus on the classroom space in this article. How best to mitigate or minimise them is worthy of further consideration.

It must also be recognised that merely intending to 'co-produce' a space does not make it so. This article does not focus on the myriad of interpersonal micro relations which contribute to building a sense of familiarity and trust in the space, such as what we wore, how we carried ourselves, and the kinds of 'small talk' we engaged in, or avoided. Our shared sense of familiarity with the kinds of issues experienced by adult men in such an institution, and deliberate distancing of our actions from the disciplinary infrastructure of the prison, helped create space to facilitate different types of conversation, with the aid of the university students. This is perhaps best communicated and demonstrated in person, through a form of shadowing, or similar.

Academia continues to overwhelmingly privilege peer-reviewed academic publications (Pahl and Pool, 2017), which, whilst useful, are often inaccessible financially or stylistically to people outside higher education institutions (Bell and Pahl, 2018). Where these are the only outlet for publication, co-production risks functioning as a way for academics to reproduce themselves through a parasitical relationship with the collective labour of communities (Autonomous Geographies Research Collective, 2010). Disseminating co-produced research through a diverse range of methods, such as co-authored books, podcasts, zines, artworks, films, exhibitions, posters, apps, guided walks, pamphlets and soundwalks, can be helpful (Bell and Pahl, 2018). They are also accompanied by further resource implications. There is no single, universal, way to go about this, and the impact of such work is greater where it becomes further normalised and embedded, rather than as an exceptional pocket of practice.

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Endnotes

1 Average duration: one hour.

2 Includes two interviews from a pilot course in 2018.

3 There were a small number of absences by prison learners for legal visits. On one occasion, the lockdown of a wing caused the late arrival of one prison learner and the absence of another. During the final week, one prison learner was unable to attend for reported bad behaviour during the week.

4 Three of the DMU students were from Black or Ethnically Minoritised groups, seven were white. Six of the HMP Lifer students were from BEM groups, including one man who identified as a Traveller; four were white.

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